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Music as Muse:

Excerpt of *Earworm*, a Novel

Plus an Accompanying Exegesis:

“Will Bunny Stay Dead? :

the Unreconstructed Male in *Grinderman* and

*The Death of Bunny Munro*”

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## Music as Muse: Novel Excerpt and Exegesis

### Introduction

This thesis consists of an excerpt of a novel, *Earworm*, plus an accompanying exegesis, “Will Bunny Stay Dead?: the Unreconstructed Male in *Grinderman* and *The Death of Bunny Munro*.”

*Earworm* is a novel narrated by a pop tune. The fictional love song, “Empty Fairground,” echoes within the consciousnesses of several characters, either skulking in the back of the mind or pushing to the forefront of thought. It connects readily with the memories and fantasies of its “hosts.” The more meaning each person associates with the song, the greater the hold it has within their mind. The novel explores the way that pop culture affects us, fusing inextricably with our reminiscences and giving voice to attitudes and identity. It plays with the relationships between language and music, with the prose often reading like lyrics. Musical terms and imagery abound.

### *Earworm* Synopsis:

The novel divides into five “tracks.” The first two introduce Nicole, a twenty-two year old student in Hobart who believes she was conceived while the hit “Empty Fairground” was playing. When Nicole discovers her recently deceased father was not her biological parent she undergoes a crisis of identity and begins to hate the tune that she had previously adored. Track Three concerns Spencer, an academic living in Adelaide and Nicole’s unwitting biological father. Lingerin in a passionless marriage strained by the grief of a stillborn daughter, Spencer uses the song to revive memories of the affair he had with Nicole’s mother in a distant Tasmanian summer. Spencer is drawn to Marla, one of his students. Track Four draws the two main characters closer as Nicole spies on Spencer in Adelaide while trying to brace herself for an encounter. She hopes that Spencer will provide clues to her own identity. Spencer, meanwhile, is tempted by infidelity. Nicole plans to overdose at a reunion concert by JayJay, the band that wrote and recorded “Empty Fairground.” She will die to the same tune that accompanied her conception. At the same concert, Spencer prepares to end his marriage via a phone call. The narrator yearns to protect Nicole and prevent Spencer’s folly, yet cannot inject direct thoughts into its hosts. Can the song that exists in their heads juggle fantasies and

recollections effectively enough to save a marriage – and a life? The final “hidden” track presents an epilogue.

The excerpt of *Earworm* presented for assessment comes from the beginning of Track Three. It introduces Spencer and his wife, Vivienne. Spencer rediscovers “Empty Fairground” and indulges in memories of his youthful fling. He is attracted to Marla, who is trying to conclude a relationship with the unstable Griff. It presents a new side of our storyteller as the narrator is intoxicated by the speed metal cover of itself that roars in Marla’s mind.

Please note: in order to maintain consistency with citations within the exegesis, the page numbering of the *Earworm* excerpt retains the pagination of the novel manuscript.

Exegesis: “Will Bunny Stay Dead?: the Unreconstructed Male in *Grinderman* and *The Death of Bunny Munro*”

In developing the voice of the narrator of *Earworm* I have attempted to steep the prose in musical allusion. It was therefore instructive to explore connections between literature and music in the accompanying exegesis. I elected to examine two side projects in the artistic trajectory of Nick Cave: the novel *The Death of Bunny Munro* (2009) and the eponymous debut album by Cave’s offshoot band Grinderman. Cave is primarily a songwriter and musician but has also written novels, short stories, plays and screenplays. He is an intriguing candidate for a study of the ways in which literature and music interrelate. Moreover, Cave considers himself a narrative songwriter (Buck). The two projects chosen share themes, language and a sense of humour that is broader than Cave’s usual mordant wit. Both projects feature manifestations of the “unreconstructed male” and a study of Cave’s attitude to this stereotype provides insight into the ways in which song and story interact.

The exegesis also demonstrates how *The Death of Bunny Munro* was informed by Cave’s longstanding work with his main band, Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds. This in turn shines a light on the musical influences that construct the narrator’s diction and syntax in *Earworm*. Cave, perhaps to the surprise of many who consider him bleak and menacing, considers himself to be first and foremost a creator of love songs (Cave “Secret” 1). This dovetails neatly with my narrator who is proud to be a love song, and who allows ready identification with the genre to

colour its interpretations of the machinations, emotions and complexities of the humans whose minds it inhabits.

Works Cited:

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## **WILL BUNNY STAY DEAD? : THE UNRECONSTRUCTED MALE IN *GRINDERMAN AND THE DEATH OF BUNNY MUNRO***

### **Introduction**

Accompaniment: “Boy Hero” (1979) – The Boys Next Door

The Grinderman song “No Pussy Blues” (2007) opens with the tap-tapping of a typewriter segueing neatly into the snap-tapping of a hi-hat cymbal. It is a concise aural précis, not only of Grinderman’s singer Nick Cave’s career which has encompassed performance, song writing, prose and screenwriting, but of the close correlations between music and literature: the rhythm of language. It is meaningful to me because my novel, *Earworm*, is narrated by a love song and I have incorporated elements of music into the narration. In this exegesis I elected to explore the interactions between music and literature and Cave provides an intriguing example of an artist working across both mediums. I therefore chose to examine two tangents in Cave’s career: the novel *The Death of Bunny Munro* (2009) and the eponymous first album of “side-project” band, Grinderman (2007).

Cave’s main band, Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, has a reputation for producing dark, threatening songs, often laced with black humour. Cave’s love songs can be romantic, melancholic and confrontational, sometimes conflating erotic relationships with a spiritual relationship with God (Boer “Love, Pain and Redemption in the Music of Nick Cave 163). There are thematic consistencies of love, loss, retribution, suspicion of conventional Christianity and justification of personal spirituality that flow through succeeding Cave albums. Humour is sly, dry and rarely broad. I will show that the two artistic tangents allowed Cave to explore variations of his major themes and to experiment with broader comedy and that, because the projects were conceived contemporaneously, there is an osmosis of ideas between them. I will demonstrate how the various artistic outlets Cave allows himself bleed into and influence each other.

In this introduction, I will give a brief summary of Cave’s career and look at how his abiding interest in literature has affected his output. In the first section I will discuss how Cave’s vocation as a performer influences *The Death of Bunny Munro* and *Grinderman*. Because both book and disc involve studies of

“unreconstructed” males driven by, even blinded by, sexual urges, I will investigate Cave’s relationships to masculinity in the second section, and accusations of misogyny in Cave’s work in the third. In the fourth section I will discuss notions of performance and gender in *The Death of Bunny Munro*, and in the final two sections I will look at ideas of redemption in both works in order to define Cave’s view of the unreconstructed male. Is Cave condemning or celebrating the thoughts and deeds of his narrators and characters? Is he suggesting that, deep down, all heteronormative men are helplessly driven by their libido and a resentment of women, or that the attitudes presented are formulations of the past, an example of what Raymond Williams connotes as a residual element of culture (R. Williams 122-23)? Or is Cave, the performer, enacting a complex pas-de-deux with political correctness and unrestrained hedonism?

I chose these lateral branches of Cave’s career because, as Christopher Hartney’s literature review attests, Cave’s previous novel *And the Ass Saw the Angel* (1989) and his main musical concern, The Bad Seeds, have already been heavily dissected by scholars (Hartney), while Grinderman tends to be dismissed as the product of late-mid-life crisis or relegated to a joke. Cave’s wrought relationship with Christianity has been studied meticulously by theologian Roland Boer, whose essays on Cave have been collected into a book (Boer *Nick Cave: A Study of Love, Death and Apocalypse*). I have therefore chosen two projects that steer away from religion, one very self-consciously, although, with Cave, God is always in the house. The mainstream press has always courted Cave, often with mixed results. A good selection of mainstream articles that span Cave’s career can be found in the edited collection *Nick Cave: Sinner Saint: the True Confessions* (2011). This collection has little to say on *The Death of Bunny Munro*, but was invaluable in piecing together the time-line of the novel’s conception and completion. A radio interview to promote the album *Push the Sky Away* (Buck) and the recent film *20,000 Days on Earth* (Pollard and Forsyth) have also proved enlightening. There is an audio-book of Cave reading *Bunny Munro*, with music by Cave and fellow Grinderman Warren Ellis (Cave and Ellis *The Death of Bunny Munro*), but my thin hopes that this might prove to be a convenient synthesis of book and band were swiftly dashed. The sorrowful piano, yearning violin and ominous electronic drones that haunt the reading are

more akin to Cave and Ellis's film scores than the sonic dissonance of Grinderman.

Each section of the exegesis is headed by an "accompaniment." This is a suggestion for a background soundtrack while reading (although, apart from bookending with the introduction and the conclusion, I have avoided Cave's songs). The soundtrack has (possibly tenuous) thematic links to the section, but it is hoped this will create an earworm that will echo within the mind of the reader. "Earworm", or "sticky music," is the colloquial expression for what psychologists have dubbed Involuntary Musical Imagery. As a psychologist intrigued by the connections between music and memory, Victoria J. Williamson has done extensive research into earworms (Williamson et al.). My novel, *Earworm*, explores the way pop songs can contribute to a sense of identity by fusing with memory and fantasy. The novel is narrated by a song which lodges in the consciousnesses of various characters, sometimes looping in their immediate thoughts and at other times skulking in the back of the mind. The effectiveness of its grip on any single mind depends on the memories associated with it and the amount of meaning each individual gleans from it. Earworms are not new to fiction. Something very like one plagues the narrator of Mark Twain's 1876 short story "A Literary Nightmare" (Twain). Strictly speaking, it is a popular verse from a newspaper that invades the narrator's mind, although Twain refers to it as a "jingle," a word that has a different – although earworm-relevant – meaning today. In E. B. White's short satire "The Supremacy of Uruguay" (1933), a catchy tune blaring from speakers attached to drone aircraft is used to enfeeble whole nations, resulting in world domination (White). Even Cave's protagonist Bunny Munro is not immune to earworms, obsessively carolling Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody" (1975) as he struggles through a storm to an ill-fated assignation (Cave *Bunny* 194-97).

Although primarily considered to be a performer and songwriter, Nick Cave signalled his interest in literature early in his artistic arc. Cave emerged in the late seventies as the charismatic front man with gawky punksters, The Boys Next Door. He remained an "underground" act until becoming a household name after recording a duet with Kylie Minogue. He is now considered a musical survivor, nudging into the pantheon of respected veteran troubadours that include Leonard Cohen and Tom Waits and snapping at the heels of Bob Dylan and Neil



Young. With a librarian mother and a schoolteacher father who became a crusader for adult education in country Victoria (Wellberry 59), the young Cave was surrounded by books. Cave's father, Colin, dreamed of being a writer: he had a couple of short stories published (Wellberry 57) and had abandoned several attempts at novels (Wellberry 58). Cave credits his father with encouraging him to explore literature (Conrad 3). In the dramatised documentary film *20,000 Days on Earth*, Cave declares that one of his earliest memories of his father was Colin Cave's "performance" as he read the opening passages of *Lolita* to him (Pollard and Forsyth). Colin Cave may have been disappointed by his offspring's early excursions into music rather than words. Anita Lane, Cave's girlfriend at the time, recalls: "[Nick] really wanted to impress his father and wanted him to think he was clever. His father would just laugh at him, he wouldn't take any notice" (Lane qtd. in Mordue "Man or Myth?" 84).

Cave's love of literature was indelible and surfaced in his lyrics. In an environment where it was imperative to establish "street cred," The Boys Next Door was ridiculed in the punk scene because it came from a snooty private school, Caulfield Grammar (Faber 18). The musicians flaunted their education and presented arch and self-conscious lyrics such as "Shivers" (1979) and "Nick the Stripper" (1981). The Boys Next Door's guitarist and song writing rival Rowland S. Howard was described by fellow band member Mick Harvey as "a well read dandy" (Lowenstein and Milburn), bassist Tracey Pew was known for dipping into Plato's *Republic* (Johnston 56) and when the band changed its name to The Birthday Party, Pinter may have been as much on their minds as their recent single "Happy Birthday" (1980) (Gambotto 38). An early nod to the Bard appeared in "Hamlet (Pow! Pow! Pow!)" (1982) with Cave screeching: "Where for art thou, baby-face?" (Cave and Howard). Zoe Alderton, citing Cave's lecture "The Flesh Made Word," notes that: "His early song writing was dictated by whatever book he was reading at the time" (Alderton 170). When The Birthday Party moved to London in the early eighties, Cave found himself living in squalor and poverty. He sought solace in Samuel Beckett (Mordue "Man or Myth?" 85), Alfred Jarry and the Southern Gothic of William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor (Sutcliffe 218). Cave was also delving into the literary work that would come to sustain him the most: a King James Bible (Alderton 170). Gerard Elson exhaustively plumbs Cave's literary allusions, influences and

plunderings – from Martin Amis to Boris Pasternak to Charles Bukowski – in the essay “Bibliomancer: Nick Cave, Writer” (Elson). It is little wonder then, that Cave considers himself a narrative songwriter: “I’m a storyteller. That’s always been the way” (Cave qtd. in Buck).

When The Birthday Party disbanded, Cave seized further control by essentially becoming a solo artist with a backing band, The Bad Seeds. Their first album contained the Mark Twain pastiche “Saint Huck” (1984) (which also included a nod to Franz Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* [1915]). Songs on later albums name-checked Cave’s favourite writers, such as Vladimir Nabokov and Philip Larkin (“There She Goes, My Beautiful World” [2004]), and Sappho and W.H. Auden (“Hiding All Away” [2004]). Auden, as we shall see, has had an enduring effect on the way Cave justifies his urge to write. In the lecture “The Secret Life of the Love Song,” while explaining how the loss of his father drove him to create, and thus contact God, Cave made little mention of music, saying instead: “*Language* became the blanket that I threw over the invisible man, that gave him shape and form” (Cave “The Secret Life of the Love Song” 1) (my italics). Cave has always moved in bohemian circles, surrounding himself with other writers and artists, including Will Self, the photographer Polly Borland and film-makers Wim Wenders and John Hillcoat. After a run of short stories, it came as no surprise when Cave produced a well-received novel, *And the Ass Saw the Angel*. Links between songs and the novel became evident: The Birthday Party song “Swampland” (1983), which describes a hounded fugitive trapped and sinking in a quagmire, is essentially the framing story of *Ass*, and elements of that novel have recurred in such far flung songs as “Tupelo” (1985) and “Crow Jane” (1996). Cave, of course, isn’t the first musician to dabble with fiction: John Lennon, Bob Dylan, Henry Rollins, Dave Warner, Richard Hell and many others have done so. Similarly, many novelists have engaged in musical projects, usually by penning lyrics or librettos. These include Kazuo Ishiguro, Peter Goldsworthy, Michael Moorcock and, most successfully, Leonard Cohen. Cave has since ventured into acting and screenplay writing, curated arts festivals, produced a further novel and co-composed film and theatre soundtracks. Books of his lyrics have been published complete with first-line indexes, as if poetry. He is often branded a “renaissance man” (Sandall).

**Performance in *Grinderman* and *The Death of Bunny Munro***

Accompaniment: “Grinder Man Blues” (1940) – Memphis Slim

When the first album from Nick Cave’s side-project, *Grinderman*, was released in 2007, critics and fans were anticipating a radical shift in artistic direction. The previous release from Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds was the grandiose double disc *Abattoir Blues/the Lyre of Orpheus* (2004), complete with lavish production and an overpowering female gospel backing choir. It contained many of the conflicted love songs Cave was famous for, in which devotion and adoration crash headlong into rancour and violence, plus the usual heretical hymns outlining Cave’s complex relationship with religion (Alderton). In contrast, the eponymous *Grinderman* disc was stark, raucous noise. Whereas the Bad Seeds contained a cumbersome retinue of eight men (all of Cave’s backing bands up to now have been, literally, *manned*, with female session vocalists enlisted when necessary), *Grinderman* was a lean, mean cadre of four. Although an offshoot of the Bad Seeds, the *Grinderman* musicians’ appearance was augmented by shaggy beards and longer, unkempt hair. To differentiate himself as the front man, Cave forsook the beard but adopted a handlebar moustache that gave him the aura of a seventies’ porn star.

Cave eschewed his usual practice of penning lyrics alone in his office for ad-libbing and workshopping the words with the band as they jammed. There was a shift in tone and subject matter. Cave has stated: “Actualising of God through the medium of the love song remains my prime motivation as an artist. The love song is the truest and most distinctive human gift for recognising God and a gift that God Himself needs” (Cave “Secret” 1). Yet when Cave consulted his trusted musical confidant, Warren Ellis, on how he should proceed with the side project, Ellis replied: “How about you don’t write about God and love” (Amorosi). Cave, shorn of his major preoccupations and his usual *modus operandi* and perhaps influenced by the more collegiate process of developing lyrics in a sweaty rehearsal room jostled by his male peers, took a thematic tangent. As A. D. Amorosi sums up: “There, Cave sang about Rock, Sex, Men, Inadequacy, Age and Rock” (Amorosi 1). The tone of the album veered towards comedy and (perhaps) satire. The first thing to note is that this was not a completely new direction. Despite his reputation as a gloomy Gothic doomsayer,

Cave has penned many comic and satirical lyrics (“God is in the House”, “Lay Me Low”, “The Curse of Millhaven” and many others). In fact, the 1994 song “Thirsty Dog,” in which the narrator languishes in a bar cataloguing all the hilarious reasons he needs to apologise to his lover after their “three year *war*” (Cave “Thirsty Dog”) (my italics), accompanied by a driving guitar jag, could be considered an early template for Grinderman’s oeuvre.<sup>1</sup> The other noteworthy notion is that Cave cheats, defying Ellis’s edict. The lunar locality of his deceased father in “Man in the Moon” is an easy substitute for Heaven, and the petulant statement of male independence in “(I Don’t Need You to) Set Me Free” (a song that would not sound out of place on a Bad Seeds’ disc) resolves as a dependent love song with the narrator reluctantly admitting he does need his lover to free him (Cave and Grinderman “Set Me Free”).

The opening number, “Get It On,” outlines the band’s mission: to revitalise themselves and defy the forces that sap their creative juices (characterised by Winston Churchill’s black dog,<sup>2</sup> Kafka’s white mice and Cave’s own animal totem of creative decrepitude, the baboon [Jones 127]), the blokes need to descend to the basement, mark out their territory and cut loose. The “descent” is a conscious retreat from the musical reputation and elaborate songsmithery of the Bad Seeds to cacophony, chaos and spontaneity. The basement, as Angela Jones asserts, has its antecedent in Bob Dylan’s *Basement Tapes* and signifies rough, honest demos (Jones 128). Here, the basement becomes a kind of man-shed, a “‘boys-own’ space” (130) where blokes can create free of feminine influence – a man-cave for Cave-men (an overdone pun, but who can resist?). “Indeed,” writes Jones, “the album is often constructed as an exercise conducted largely for the band-members’ own amusement more than anything else: the kind of ‘low-down dirty’ rock’n’roll four guys make when they think they’re alone and no-one is watching” (126). “Get It On” presents an archetypal rock star – a male ridiculously clad in a “sequined gown” and “pink hair curlers” who is “chipped ... from the frozen snow” and crawls “out of the

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<sup>1</sup> Other contenders include “Jack the Ripper” (1992) and “The Lyre of Orpheus” (2004), although the first is less than cheery and the classical references of the latter may preclude it.

<sup>2</sup> Churchill’s symbol of clinical depression also features in my novel *Earworm*, via Led Zeppelin’s song “Black Dog” (1971). A character refers to his depressive states as “The Zeppelin.”

ooze” with his “monkey fingers” and “defies evolution” (Cave and Grinderman “Get It On”). The figure is strangely androgynous, like a glam rock star<sup>3</sup> and barely evolved.<sup>4</sup> He is sexually licentious and vanishes in a cloud of myth and possible mayhem before he can become reduced by such prosaic realities as the “tax man” (Cave and Grinderman “Get It On”). Like this excavated rock star,<sup>5</sup> the members of Grinderman also seem to be defying Darwin, de-evolving from the Bad Seeds to become almost as hairy as the desperately masturbating monkey on the album’s sleeve; while the blurred sexual identity of the figure brings to mind discussions of Cave’s masculinity by Laknath Jayasinghe, which will be discussed later.

Cave ventured to play guitar for the first time in Grinderman and credits this with a newfound sense of collegiality he developed with his cohorts. He claims that being a front man separates him from the rest of the band, while playing guitar brings him into the fold. He becomes part of the glue that holds a combo together. Cave has played piano in the past, but for some reason this has not connected him with his fellow musicians. Perhaps it is something about the celebrated phallic qualities of the guitar that draws him into the male band huddle. Cave makes it clear that it is a very masculine bond:

There’s something that happens onstage between musicians that I found out with Grinderman, playing guitar with them. It’s very much about eye contact, playing onstage; the song is developing in its own way and it’s really about a very concentrated and intimate contact between the members, a male intimacy that most people don’t share, or that men share in the workplace. But the frontman isn’t privy to that. It’s all happening at the back. (Cave qtd. in Sutcliffe, 197)

It is significant that, unlike the Bad Seeds, Grinderman is a name unto itself rather than an appellation onto Cave’s own.

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<sup>3</sup> Although the pink hair curlers refer directly to a story Cave enjoys about pre-glam Jimi Hendrix (Hattenstone 187).

<sup>4</sup> David Buchbinder notes that in the nineteenth century, post-Darwin, the female was associated with the animal and the unevolved. This interpretation would further blur the gender identity of the Rock Star in “Get It On” and the rock stars singing about him (Buchbinder 103).

<sup>5</sup> A curious echo of the rock star figure surfaces in Cave’s book-length poem *The Sick Bag Song* (2015), in which the narrator, a fictionalised Cave, comes across his band trapped in “a great block of transparent ice.” Cave writes: “Warren, like a psychedelic Early Man, crouches over his violin” (Cave qtd. in Mordue “Rock Odyssey”). This relates to The Bad Seeds rather than Grinderman, but Cave seems to enjoy depicting his fellow musicians as throwbacks.

The first Grinderman album, then, is about men's business. It involves their primitive affinity with rock music, their special bond with their fathers, especially if the latter is deceased ("Man in the Moon") and their relationship with women. When asked by Amorosi where the female character present in Bad Seeds' albums has gone, Cave replied: "She's been given the freedom to leave the building. The man character remains here with all his neurosis and inadequacies and impotent-cies. Is that a word? Impotent-ies. That's the thematic development, so to speak" (Amorosi 6). In this clutch of songs, men pathetically dream of independence from women, are in thrall to women, stalk women and beg sex from them. Much of it presents the relationship between the sexes as war. This is reflected in the aggression of the music and Cave's continual use of militaristic and weapons' imagery. The examples are numerous: the approach of Cave's lover in "Honey Bee (Let's Fly to Mars)" inspires talk of "dirty bombs," an alerted "coastal command" and everyone in "ack-ack positions," and when she arrives amidst a plethora of apocalyptic visions, Cave suggests they decamp to the war god's planet, a sphere heavily associated with masculinity (Cave and Grinderman "Honey Bee"). Similarly, Cave's description of his loved one in "When My Love Comes Down" evokes drumming soldiers, a Kalashnikov and "victorious marching" with "banners of defeat" (Cave and Grinderman "When Love"). There are ditties entitled "Depth Charge Ethel" and "Love Bomb." A cold war ensues in "No Pussy Blues," in which Cave describes the hoops he jumps through to persuade his partner to have sex with him, only to be met with refusal. The shouted exclamation "Damn!" is followed by a squall of frustrated guitar.

By far the most curious *Grinderman* song is "Go Tell the Women". A halting jazz riff that borders on the comic accompanies Cave as he becomes the spokesman for an enervated, downtrodden and befuddled male gender grasping for identity and dignity. Cave sets out man-kind's achievements, having, rather smugly, evolved ("We're up on our hind legs / the problem solved" [Cave and Grinderman "Go Tell the Women"]) and mastered skills such as mathematics and genetics.<sup>6</sup> The entire gender is aggrieved that its need for a little "consensual

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Eaglestone interprets the lines "We leave religion / to the psychos and fanatics" as a criticism of the attacks on religion from the new breed of aggressive atheists, with the mention of "genetics" indicting one of their leading authors, the

rape” has been misunderstood, and petulantly announces its departure (the line “Go tell the women that we’re leaving” implies the sexes are not currently on speaking terms). I can only assume man-kind will be bound for some kind of interplanetary shed-world, probably Mars. The muddled and misconstrued men are perhaps on the run from feminism: the use of the confronting term “consensual rape” is possibly a swipe at hard-line feminists who argue that all sex is molestation (or possibly just the product of a bunch of chortling blokes seeing how much provocation they can get away with). The music and Cave’s delivery make man-kind sound rather peevish and, of course, their solution to the problem is childish and ridiculous. The song concludes with the only direct feminine point of view in the recorded history of the now defunct Grinderman (if you do not count the thoughts of “Electric Alice”), as Cave, in a higher register, begs: “Hey hey hey / Come on back now to the *fray*” (Cave and Grinderman “Tell”) (my italics). The female voice is, stereotypically, a declaration of reconciliation. The effect, as with the majority of the songs, is humorous. As Cave rather flippantly stated in *Rolling Stone*: “I consider myself to be first and foremost a comic writer” (Mordue “Man or Myth?” 92).

### **Masculinity**

Accompaniment: “I Like It Both Ways” (1976) – Supernaut

With the gender battlelines drawn on the *Grinderman* album, it is useful to look at Cave’s relationship to masculinity. In the essay “Dance Performance and the Production and Consumption of Masculinity,” Laknath Jayasinghe describes the Australian pub rock scene of the seventies and eighties, when Cave first started performing, as an essentially working-class conservative, masculine experience. Pop music, aimed at younger audiences, had already challenged this paradigm via glam rock, but older punters seeking harder edged entertainment in venues where they could booze were still locked into the masculine modes of blues and

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geneticist Richard Dawkins (Eagleton 150). It’s a finely argued case, but I prefer to see this line as Cave having a self-deprecating dig at his own persona as a “god botherer” and perhaps a sly dig at Ellis’s edict of no love, no God. Jillian Burt views the song as a celebration of humanity’s achievements, and lionises the “wise and mature” lyrics of the *Grinderman* CD (Burt 24). Her essay is wincingly personal, hagiographic and sprinkled with errors. Despite this, I can’t help admiring her unique, if subjective, viewpoint and would recommend this essay to anybody interested in Cave.

prog-rock, epitomised by the macho stances of such bands as Deep Purple, Billy Thorpe and the Aztecs and Status Quo. Jayasinghe asserts that punk rock and alternative music developed partly as a reaction to this value system. Jayasinghe writes: “Male performers in the scene, including Cave and others such as Simon Bonney from Crime and the City Solution, incorporated transgressive masculinities and sexualities into their performances, thus flagging the subculture as an ‘unmanly’ site for rock performance, at least in comparison to the spaces and attitudes of Oz pub rock” (Jayasinghe 70). It is notable that many punk musicians were fans of glam and Australian glitter band Supernaut swiftly adopted punk to become The Nauts. Cave was also influenced by the gender-bending antics of glam.<sup>7</sup> Clinton Walker describes The Boys Next Door as “... a sort of glam-punk, power-pop garage band who, if anything were reminiscent of Roxy Music...” (Walker 34). Jayasinghe considers Cave’s pelvic thrusts and “grinds” to be a parody of rock stagecraft and in his study of the film clip of “Nick the Stripper” (1981) he suggests the “ungendered” nappy that Cave models and his smooching of Rowland S. Howard are subversions of heteronormative macho stances (Jayasinghe 71-72). He writes: “... the queer pleasures for both Cave and audience in the Crystal Ballroom scene are largely ‘contra-straight,’ in that they are not fuelled by queer desire. Instead, these pleasures are fed by what popular culture critic Alexander Doty has called a form of queer participation that can be enjoyed by heterosexuals, ‘straight queerness’” (77). In David Buchbinder’s terminology, drawn from queer theory, this film clip comes “prequeered” (Buchbinder 120).

Jayasinghe adds a caveat to what he views as Cave’s challenging of normative masculinity, his “effeminacy” and “parodic masculinity” (Jayasinghe 77). He believes Cave is not totally dedicated to these displays of subversion and that there is a degree of “duplicity” in his stage antics: “[an] upholding of the very structures of masculinity that he seeks to disrupt” (75). This is an important point: as The Birthday Party’s gigs became more drug fuelled, rumours of Cave physically attacking audience members emerged. Promotions for German live shows billed them as “The Most Violent Band in the World” (Cave qtd. in Gambotto 39). Outwardly, this resembles R. W. Connell’s concept of “protest

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<sup>7</sup> He also describes a brief dalliance with transvestism – in order to hold the interest of a girl – as one of his earliest memories (Pollard and Forsyth).



masculinity,” in which commitments to sexual equality, shared child care and feminised adornment co-exist with displays of machismo (Connell 112). In *Masculinities* (2005), Connell proposes that there is no single essentialist configuration of manhood that permeates the culture, but rather a range of configurations: a multitude of masculinities. There is the current exemplar – the hegemonic – that has been constructed by, and is still prey to, a combination of cultural, societal and historic influences (77). Connell proposes further subsets within the hegemonic: the subordinate, complicit and the marginalised. Subordinate masculinities are stigmatised, oppressed and associated with femininity (for example, gay men and “nerds”). Complicit masculinities include those men unable or unwilling to totally comply with the ideal, but who are nonetheless privileged by patriarchy. Marginalised masculinities are cordoned off from the ideal by racial, social or economic circumstances, such as patterns of unemployment (78-81). All masculinities, including the hegemonic, are dynamic, constantly reconfigured by economic, cultural and historical shifts. This is, of necessity, a crudely broad outline of Connell’s complex and ever-restless interplay between the hierarchies of masculinities.

Connell situates protest masculinity within the marginalised. He defines it as a product of poverty and poor education, neither of which blighted Cave’s upbringing. The simulacrum of protest masculinity in this case may be a result of Cave’s early punk ethic, which sat uneasily with his middle-class background. Cave and The Birthday Party opted for penury and marginalisation in London in the early eighties, and Connell might as easily be describing Cave’s youthful dilemma as much as the underemployed working-class males’ powerlessness to achieve the ideals of masculine hegemony when he writes: “One way to resolve this contradiction is a spectacular display, embracing the marginality and stigma and turning them to account” (Connell 116). Cave’s current stage presence remains aggressive as he leers over the audience stabbing his finger down into the mosh pit to underline snarled lyrics. Even with a risible moustache, he comes across as a formidable male presence. Fellow band member Warren Ellis is much more adept at challenging stereotypes of masculinity, with his sinuous body undulating as he plays his distinctly unmacho instruments, the violin and mandocaster. In a 1990 interview, Cave said: “There’s a certain way I perform on stage which I consider to be very honest, but at the same time I think it’s

treading the middle ground between some kind of complete truth and parody” (Cave qtd. in Casimir). If Cave is part parody and part promoter of stereotypical male rock stances, is he trying to have his birthday party cake and eat it too? Does Cave share Supernaut’s predilection for liking it both ways?

On and off stage, Cave is invariably besuited. He shares this masculine uniform with his musical heroes, Leonard Cohen and Tom Jones. In Jones’ earlier performances in the sixties and seventies, the frenzied whipping off of his tie and jacket was the signal to the audience that things were about to get wild. Sophistication and control was about to be usurped by animal energy. Similarly, the less stage-managed and casual removal of Cave’s jacket indicates things are, literally, hotting up. The Bad Seeds also flaunts suits of varying states of repair and tailoring. They saunter on stage looking like disreputable late-middle-aged roués. Suits are not a common rock’n’roll trope. It is a form of attire that belies fashion and indicates the group is contemptuous of trends. The band members are signalling that they are timeless, abiding by their own rules. Grinderman retain the suits but add shagginess. David Buchbinder suggests that recent trends in depilation of the male body have made their way into the mainstream from gay subculture and that it signals a yearning for a youthful, prepubescent appearance (Buchbinder 144). Grinderman, then, seem to be situating themselves as determinedly aging heterosexuals.

Men in the *Grinderman* songs are at the mercy of their urges, rather than being ruled by reason and discipline. The body and surrender to emotion are traditionally connoted as feminine, while the mind, discipline and rationality are considered masculine traits (Connell 164). By these standards, *Grinderman*’s male narrators are feminised. The narrator of “No Pussy Blues” remains helplessly celibate, even when he tries using force, and must submit to housework, a “revolting little Chihuahua” and other degradations in order to seek sex. Another male character depends on a woman to “set him free” (Cave and Grinderman “Set Me Free”) and yet another seeks his female lover’s help to stop the dissipation that she seems to have caused (Cave and Grinderman “Love Bomb”). In “Go Tell the Women” it is the men that storm off, ceding their territory, rather than expelling the women. Men are defined by women in these songs. Women are in control and are therefore, to some degree, a threat – or at least a frustration worthy of a cathartic haw of noise. Damn!

## Misogyny

Accompaniment: “Smack My Bitch Up” (1997) – The Prodigy

If Cave’s attitude to masculinity is ambivalent, his perceived attitude towards women is no less contested. Many have prosecuted the case for Cave the misogynist, from the cool, objective analysis of his early work in Simon Reynolds and Joy Press’s book on the sexual politics of rock music, *The Sex Revolts* (1995), to the passionate polemic of Anwyn Crawford’s “The Monarch of Middlebrow” (2011). Cave creates characters that brood and boil over women, often firing invective at them. In a remarkable number of instances they murder them. To be fair, quite a few men meet grisly fates in Cave’s songs, sometimes at the hands of woman – from “Henry Lee” (1996) and “The Curse of Millhaven” (1996), to “O’Malley’s Bar” (1996), “The Mercy Seat” (1988) and “Saint Huck.” As *The Sex Revolts* makes clear, the death of women is “... very much a rock’n’roll topic” (Reynolds and Press 27). Rock music evolved from the blues, and the murder ballad in which aggrieved men slaughter their lovers was a blues tradition readily adopted by male rockers. Cave, heavily indebted to blues music (Grinderman, itself, appropriating its name from Memphis Slim’s “Grinder Man Blues”) has covered many of these standards (“Hey Joe” [1965], “Knoxville Girl” [1925], “I’m Gonna Kill That Woman” [1960]) and composed more of his own. His lurid depictions of “crumpled” throats (Cave “O’ Malley’s Bar”), victims “bound with electrical tape” (Cave “Song of Joy”) and Kylie’s cratered cranium have confronted many. Cave does little to ameliorate his image when he replies to an interviewer’s query about the predatory nature of some of the characters in the *Grinderman* tunes with: “It’s sexy, man! [laughs] The girls love it! Actually Grinderman are the rock’n’roll equivalent of chick lit in my opinion” (Cave qtd. in Sutcliffe 231).

Roland Boer has listed some of Cave’s varied responses when queried about misogyny in his songs.

Sometimes he suggests it is due to a burning anger at a past lover, so he sits down and writes a song about it. At other times he points to his morbid fascination with murders and the details of serial killers. At yet other moments he admits it may be because he went to a private boys’ school, so women have become a mystery and threat. Further, as we saw

earlier, he also blames the Bible and its violence. (Boer "Redemption" 166)

Boer then forwards his own suggestion that misogyny exists in Cave's love songs because:

... just like sadness, loss, and longing, misogyny is actually part of love. But then so is misanthropy, for love is as much a power struggle, a contest between two or more people who attempt to better one another. In love we find surveillance and suspicion, jealousy and anger, breakouts and guilt, curtailment and efforts at change, put downs and mockery; in short, various levels of emotional and intellectual violence. I would suggest that Cave brings out this difficult truth. (Boer "Redemption" 167)

Cave claims the love song as his major form of expression. In his lecture "The Secret Life of the Love Song," Cave posits that true love songs contain sorrow and heartache: "We all experience within us what the Portuguese call *Suadade* [sic], which translates as an inexplicable sense of longing, an unnamed and enigmatic yearning of the soul and it is this feeling that lives in the realms of imagination and inspiration and is the breeding ground for the sad song, for the love song is the light of God, deep down, blasting through our wounds" (Cave "Secret" 1). This is consistent with Boer's theory that Cave tackles the shadier aspects of love.

Cave's lecture is of particular interest because of the nature of the narrator of *Earworm*. Love songs tend to be an exploration of a heightened moment, often containing euphoria, loss, regret or – particularly in Cave's case – resentment and fury. They rarely study the "life-cycle" of the intimate interaction between partners over a period of time. The hyperbole of the love lyric denies the practicalities and compromises of what are now commonly referred to as "relationships." Cave offers us a complex turmoil of desires but ignores domesticity. My love song narrator is equally dismissive of cooled passions, failing to recognise the affection that endures beneath the straitened relationship of Spencer and Vivienne.

Cave declares that many pop confections purporting to be love songs are indeed "hate songs" because they "... deny us our humanness and our God-given right to be sad..." (Cave "Secret" 2). He characterises these tunes as "... dollops of warm, custard-coloured baby vomit..." (3). This makes me ponder how he would appraise "Empty Fairground," the fictional tune in my novel. It is a love song with obscure imagery and an "... impressionistic sense of numinous longing..." (Varney 142), so I like to think it would pass muster.

Cave made his mark in the Melbourne punk scene in the late seventies. Part of the punk manifesto was to spurn the grandiose overproduction and grandstanding of stadium rock bands, with their strutting male musicians overdosing on testosterone. In response, the punks readily embraced female performers – Patti Smith, The Slits and Siouxsie Sioux amongst them – and its legacy still inspires strong artists such as P. J. Harvey, Courtney Love and Pink. But male punks had a dilemma: their lyrics needed to be tough, uncompromising and shocking and if they were writing interpersonal songs rather than social commentary one easy option was to plumb for venom and misogyny.<sup>8</sup> Cave was in a particular bind as he consciously avoided political and social themes. He has partly solved the problem by contrasting the delights and excitements of love affairs with the grimier, danker aspects, often within the same song. His view of love is tangled, brimming with ire and, often, vengeance. But I do not believe this to be the case with the first Grinderman album: after all, Ellis’s edict was to exclude love. This time he has reached for another solution to the punk problem – taking the piss. By presenting his narrators as pitiable and hopelessly frustrated (“Damn!”), he is ridiculing, and perhaps satirising, the unreconstructed male.

In suggesting this, I see I am conforming to Anwyn Crawford’s model of the Cave apologist:

Ah, but Cave’s defenders like to point out, you are forgetting about the man’s exquisite humour! His delicately honed irony! He is a moral satirist without peer! (The subtext to this defence often being, “Lighten up, bitch!”) The notion that Cave is being “ironic” has been used to excuse many of his worst indulgences, up to and including his pimp’s moustache. (Crawford 22)

And, really, Crawford has a point. It would be easier to argue Boer’s case that Cave is grappling with the complexities of relationships, and my own that he is a critic of his narrators, if Cave was not so inordinate. He delights in the language of violence and viciousness. Examples are not difficult to find, with Eurydice’s eyes popping from their sockets in “The Lyre of Orpheus” (2004), a couple bedding “... in a bucket of butchers’ knives” in “Jack the Ripper” (1992), heads flying in the cordite clouded bloodbath “O’Malley’s Bar” (1996) and the evocative “woman pie” in “She’s Hit” (1982).

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<sup>8</sup> Another popular option was to embrace self-loathing, which Cave adopted in “Nick the Stripper,” “Figure of Fun” (1981) and others.

Cave's anti-female diatribes are excessive: the protagonist of *And the Ass Saw the Angel*, Euchrid Eucrow, describes his mother as "... a scum-cunted, likkered-up, brain-sick swine" (Cave *And the Ass Saw the Angel* 18). When women are seen through the eyes of male characters the descriptions are overly detailed and fetishised, such as the voyeuristic view of Cosy Mo in *Ass* (pages 33-34) and the uniform and "hardcore accoutrements" (page 186) of a policewoman in *The Death of Bunny Munro*. When Cave describes violence or vitriol he is in thrall to the flow and assonance of the language (popular tools of the lyricist):

In fiction, most often I come away from a book that I love and it's about the words that have been used, not what it's taught me. I don't believe that fiction can teach you much, in the end. Language itself can have a hugely beneficial effect on you in the same way music can. Music can change the way you are, the way you move around in the world and do an enormous amount of good for a person. For me language is about the same thing on a level that's not necessarily intellectual; it's about the music and the rhythm of the words that operate on some other level.

That's what grabs me. (Cave qtd. in Sutcliffe 218)

Cave seems to believe that words, like musical notes, can provoke an emotional (or spiritual?) reaction depending on their arrangement with surrounding words that is at least partially divorced from semantics.

Authors and poets are prone to refer to the "rhythm of language" which they consider essential in constructing the "voice" of their narrative. When writing *Earworm*, a novel narrated by a song, I consciously utilised the methods of lyricists – such as alliteration, assonance, rhythm and rhyme – to establish my narrator's voice. I inserted some of the "ad-libs" that punctuate a pop singer's delivery such as "ah yeah" and "come on!" My arrogant narrator makes its own opinions known about authors' appropriation of musical terms to describe their efforts:

Authors try to convince us that their task is traumatic, yet sentences are basic equations: noun, verb, object. Try taming words to a tune, meting them to a beat. And novelists slop around in hundreds of pages to indulge their ideas, while songwriters have a scant few verses. Scribes are drama queens. They even try to elevate their "struggle" by alluding to the likes of me, carping on about the "rhythm of language." Honestly. (Varney 115)

It is disconcerting to consider my narrator would judge *Earworm* harshly as an inferior art form plundering the world of music in a pitiful attempt to enrich itself. The narrator might accuse James Joyce of a similar appropriation in the

“Sirens” chapter of *Ulysses*, where sound effects, rhythm and repetition evoke a sense of song (Joyce 245-79). Or my narrator might point the finger at Jennifer Egan’s musically themed work *A Visit From the Goon Squad*, which Egan defines not as a novel or collection of stories, but rather as a “concept album” (Jennifer Egan qtd. in van de Velde 125). The number of literary works with connections to music is legion: a small selection of contemporary fiction in which music plays an important role is listed in an appendix to the edited collection *Write in Tune: Contemporary Music in Fiction* (Hertz and Roessner 255-57). It skims the surface, failing to include such musically obsessed writers as Kazuo Ishiguro and Patrick McCabe and, of course, neglecting “classics” such as Leo Tolstoy’s *The Kreutzer Sonata* (1890) and Thomas Mann’s *Doctor Faustus* (1947).

Russell Forster believes it is the duty of the artist to discomfort and shock their audience in order to test mainstream values and challenge smugness. Forster sees shock tactics and offensiveness as a way to cut through an increasingly homogenised culture: “As the world we inhabit is increasingly mediated, difference, which is a function of identity, is increasingly threatened. A Big Mac in Shanghai is the same as a Big Mac in Yarraville” (Forster 63). He concedes part of the attraction of this is “undergraduate nose thumbing” (60). Undisciplined railing against authority and morality has been a popular pastime since long before Marlon Brando’s blind revolt against “what you got?” in the film *The Wild One* (1954). Cave’s obvious delight in poetic profanity and misogynistic indulgence deserves to be continually questioned.

### **At It Like Rabbits: *The Death of Bunny Munro***

Accompaniment: “Don’t Go Home With Your Hard On” (1977) – Leonard Cohen

We have seen that, with the Grinderman project, Cave was shorn of his usual obsessions, love and God. But why did he resort to sex and gender warfare as his variant themes? Was he merely affected by the bromance in the studio or his newfound camaraderie as a guitar player? Or were these themes already on his mind? A speculative reason for Cave’s thematic and tonal shift might be because he was enmeshed in the production of his second novel. As with his first book,

*The Death of Bunny Munro* began life as a screenplay. During the making of the film, *The Proposition* (2005), Cave and long-time friend, neighbour and collaborator, John Hillcoat, decided their next movie should take a shift in style. *Death of a Ladies' Man* was to be a sex comedy set in Brighton, depicting the misadventures of a travelling salesman of beauty products possessed by an untameable libido (Danks 112). The title was taken from a 1977 Leonard Cohen LP and one could imagine Grinderman doing a credible cover of that album's most notorious ditty "Don't Go Home With Your Hard On." Cohen's original version has a similar blokey camaraderie, with Bob Dylan and Alan Ginsberg providing carousing backing vocals, and the line "Approach her, you ape, with your tail on" (Cohen and Spector)<sup>9</sup> could have been penned by Grinderman era Cave. With its adolescent obsession with tumescence and a protagonist who finds himself trapped in a parent's footsteps and working in his father's beauty salon, this song in particular seems to have provided a template for Cave's script and the novel that developed from it. A draft of the screenplay was completed before the release of *The Proposition* in 2005 (Danks 112). When funding failed to materialise and Hillcoat abandoned the project to direct the film version of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), Cave adapted the screenplay into a novel, during which Cave "... expanded the idea hugely" (Cave qtd. in Sutcliffe 237). The gestation of *Bunny Munro* therefore covers the same period as the genesis of Grinderman: Cave describes the novel as "just written" in 2008 (Sutcliffe 226). It seems reasonable to assume the themes of gender conflict and the comedic approach taken to them would have been on Cave's mind as he worked with his off-shoot combo.

I read that book, every page  
 And then I put it away  
 Said I don't think so  
 It makes slaves of all of womankind  
 And corpses of the men

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<sup>9</sup> Phil Spector, credited as co-writer and producer of the song, was convicted in 2009 of the murder of Lana Clarkson in 2003. If Cave was inspired by the Spector-produced album *Death of a Ladies' Man*, the murder would have been a news item during the writing of the screenplay and the trial – some of which was televised – would have been topical during the novel's completion. This provides an unsavoury real world context to Cave's murder ballads, the behaviour of the males in *Bunny Munro* and, retrospectively, to the male carolling in "Don't Go Home With Your Hard On."



And I... I just don't know

"Bellringer Blues", *Grinderman II* (2010)

Cave's second novel, appearing two decades after his first, tells the story of a purveyor of beauty products who is prey to a cornucopia of addictions.<sup>10</sup>

Threatened by grief and confusion after the suicide of his wife, Libby, Bunny Munro seeks release in a debauch of drugs, sex and door-to-door salesmanship, while ostensibly teaching his son, Bunny Junior, the tricks of his trade. Bunny is divorced from his emotions and has little self awareness ("Why had he done it? Who knows? Whatever. Fuck you" [Cave *The Death of Bunny Munro* 153]). He is alienated from any feminine traits, having been raised by his father, whom he both loves and fears (78). Determinedly heterosexual, he is furious when he believes he has been mistaken for being gay (169). He avoids self-reflection by submitting to what Cave refers to as his "appetites" but he is constantly surprised to find himself crying or ambushed by grief, guilt and, occasionally, love. Cave underlines Bunny's inchoate lack of understanding by ending many similes and descriptions with the attenuation "... or something." When Bunny does grope for a sense of identity, he projects himself as a super-salesman and lothario. He appends his job onto his introductions ("I'm Bunny Munro. I am a salesman. I sell beauty products" [250]), even when nobody is there to hear (222), and he is continually convincing himself of his sexual prowess ("I am the great seducer. I work the night" [197]). Yet Bunny is so far removed from his inner life that he seems to be projecting a persona. His life as a husband, son, father and libertine appears to be an act. Like Cave, Bunny is a performer. He has a series of spiels he reels out to charm and sell product: "Now what baffles me is why a woman as fine as yourself feels it justifiable to deny her body the very thing it aches for... liquid heaven... one hundred per cent plant oils and natural fragrance... romantic, old-fashioned, sensuous... Barry White in a bottle, this stuff..." (117). He combines this with a shtick, based on his leporine forename, that he uses to ingratiate himself with women: "'Call me Bunny' he says and puts his hands behind his head and waggles them like rabbits' ears. He creases his nose and makes a snuffling sound" (119).

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<sup>10</sup> Cave's own addictions to heroin, alcohol, cigarettes and erotographomania are the stuff of myth. He has since forsaken them all, except, perhaps, for the latter (Mordue "Man or Myth?" 93).

As with Cave's rock persona, appearance is integral to Bunny's act. After all, he works in an industry that is all about the application of masks. He sports a collection of colour-saturated shirts and favours ties with rabbit motifs.

Concealed beneath this outward array and cleaved to his flesh are a series of patterned briefs in zebra, tiger and leopard skin. Fluffy on the outside, he has the markings of a predator beneath. He is gratified by his own reflection, which he considers a major factor of his success with the ladies:

He is afforded no insights, no illuminations, no great wisdoms but he can see immediately why the ladies dig him. He is not a toned, square-jawed lover boy or cummerbunded ladies' man but there's a pull, even in his booze-blasted face, a magnetic drag that has something to do with the pockets of compassion that form at the corners of his eyes when he smiles, a mischievous arch to his eyebrows and the little hymen-popping dimples in his cheeks when he laughs. Look! There they are now! (Cave *Bunny* 10)

During his wife's funeral he is pleased to note his air of tragedy has given him a "new-found pulling power" (56). He is particularly proud of his pomaded hair, which includes a stray "lovelock" that curls insouciantly across his forehead. Like the Bad Seeds and their precedent, Tom Jones, the breaking down of costume and appearance indicates control is being lost. While this presages excitement with the musicians, Bunny's dishevelment signals that he himself is disintegrating, physically and mentally, drawing closer to a demise made inevitable by the title and first sentence of the novel. The forelock is a particular litmus test for Bunny's ailing condition. In the early chapters it is a "... pomaded curl that sits, coiled and cocky, on his forehead" (24) but it becomes more disarrayed as Bunny unravels, moving from "... limp and insentient as roadkill" (131) to hanging "... like a used condom..." (220) to appearing "...intestinal, flopping across his forehead like something from the stomach of something" (236). Bunny knows his costume has an element of disarming humour and that the cartoon ties will make him appear harmless, yet he also believes he has a sexual attraction – "pulling power." Clearly, though, he must look ridiculous and deeply unfashionable: a harlequin of clashing colours with pomaded hair. This visual irony, effective enough in the book, is possibly a layover from the screenplay.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ray Winstone was briefly in discussion to play Bunny. Imagine the visual possibilities...

Bunny is as dedicated to honing his persona as Cave and his band mates. He listens assiduously to *Woman's Hour* on the radio, informing his son that it is “educational.” He has learnt, for example, that women prefer men to wear maroon coloured clothes (16), and Bunny Junior sees his father entranced by the “super-authoritative female voice” of the presenter of the program:

[Bunny Junior] keeps his eyes closed as he listens to the radio. He hears a lady talking about the sexualising or something of children through advertising. She starts talking about Barbie dolls and in particular a new doll called Bratz that looks like it has just had sex or taken a whole lot of drugs or something. When she says, “Our children are having their childhoods stolen from them,” he hears his father repeat the line and then say it again as if he is storing it away in his memory. (Cave *Bunny* 58-59)

*Woman's Hour* seems to have had quite an effect on Cave. It resurfaces in the *Grinderman* song “Love Bomb,” where the love sick and physically dissolving narrator turns to various broadcasting resources to seek a cure for his dissipation, only to find that the BBC, MTV, *Woman's Hour* and *Garden Question Time* cannot help him. One suspects Cave is being snide here, suggesting these mainstream options are merely safe, ineffectual entertainments. In reference to the latter program, Cave says: “... halfway through it you think, what the fuck? Why am I listening to this?” (Sutcliffe 229). *Woman's Hour* began in 1946 as an encouragement for women to re-establish home life after the trauma of the Second World War. Its current target demographic is people in their mid-fifties and approximately forty per cent of its audience are male. It has a reputation for being “... very old fashioned and middle-England” that is, apparently, undeserved (Byrne). It is a bastion of well-informed, intelligent, middle-class opinion, similar to *Life Matters* on ABC's Radio National.<sup>12</sup> Bunny co-opts politically correct opinions from such programs that he would never personally endorse to bolster his persona. Later, as his performance unravels, he spouts the line about stolen childhoods almost as a reflex (Cave *Bunny* 212). Removed from context, it falls flat and meaningless.

One suspects Cave is as much in conflict with the constraints of political correctness as with conventional morality. In the interview with Sutcliffe he complains that there is more censorship today than there was thirty years ago: “And, shit, the stuff you could say sixty years ago! I mean, those old blues guys,

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<sup>12</sup> The BBC has an archive of episodes at [www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b007qlvb/broadcasts/upcoming](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b007qlvb/broadcasts/upcoming).

outrageous” (Sutcliffe 231). This would pit Cave as much against the left as the right. Cave reacts against these restrictions by describing an orgy of libidinous selfishness in a rush of rich and riotous language, but ridicules and satirises the hedonism, then punishes and destroys its main perpetrator. Cave is doing his trick with the cake again. Yet Bunny Junior is in the car listening with his father and, clutching his prized encyclopaedia, the boy is a sponge for information. As we will see, *Woman’s Hour* has its effect on him, too.

Bunny is as unreconstructed a male as any of the narrators on *Grinderman*. He objectifies women, superimposing fantasy personalities onto them: they are invariably “up for it” (Cave *Bunny* 54) and he imagines their bodies in lurid detail. He is optimistic, opportunistic and fools himself about the effect he has. His confidence and daring often succeeds, but lately his act is being seen through (“Does this routine actually work on the ladies, Bunny?” [130]). If he was ever a great seducer, he is certainly on the skids now. He hides his lack of understanding about the opposite sex with braggadocio and bluster. In many ways, he is as cartoonish as the rabbits that adorn his ties. Cave makes it safe for us to laugh at Bunny’s offensive behaviour by assuring us from page one that he will get his comeuppance. Portents of doom dog him throughout the novel, from the bedevilled serial killer that seems to be crossing the country to target Bunny, to the ominous thunderclouds that threaten apocalypse, to the reappearances of the cement mixer that will eventually collide into Bunny’s car. Irvine Welsh makes a similar pact with readers of his novel *Filth* (1998): enjoy the outrageousness of the sexism, violence and racism of the main character, and I, the author, will render him pitiable and ridiculous at the conclusion.

The effect reminds me of the traditional horror film: audiences were given licence to relate to monsters and sexual predators such as Christopher Lee’s brooding Dracula, and revel in the vicarious thrills of their behaviour, because they knew the monsters would be defeated before the credits rolled. Traditionally, the horror genre has it both ways, providing an excess of immorality and abomination before re-setting the normative. Film critic Robin Wood characterises this as a desire to escape the repressions imposed by conforming to the dominant social order, which is permissible as long as the repressions are restored (Wood). Barbara Creed puts a feminist and Freudian spin on this idea, arguing that monsters, with their disregard of borders and

regulations, generate resistance and rebellion to patriarchy, or the “symbolic order” (of language, law and civilisation). She utilises Freud’s theory of “the uncanny” – an uneasiness produced by a juxtaposition of the familiar to the unfamiliar, the frightening to the everyday – to analyse horror films and their ability to unearth repressed fears and desires (Creed 3). In her study of male monsters, Creed defines three ingredients that constitute “the primary uncanny”: women, death and the animal. These three elements are repressed by the symbolic order, which celebrates male rationality, control rather than decay, and human civilisation. Bunny Munro embodies all three conditions of Creed’s primary uncanny. Like Cave the performer as described by Jayasinghe, Bunny is an amalgam of feminine and masculine signifiers. His cartoonish clothes and forename<sup>13</sup> are feminised and childlike. He is undisciplined and at the mercy of his “appetites” – controlled by body rather than mind – and, as Buchbinder notes, these factors connote the feminine (Buchbinder 127). An inability to deny his grief leads to his downfall: he is unable to achieve the masculine ideal of emotional control. Yet his aggression, swagger and arrogance reek of masculinity. He is further feminised via his job as a seller of beauty products and because his body is not discrete and impenetrably bordered (in a possible fantasy sequence, he is raped by the Devil<sup>14</sup> [Cave *Bunny* 211]). He is shadowed by death, the second condition of the primary uncanny. Finally, his “appetites” are bestial, and he is constantly associated with animals, particularly wolves and rabbits. When Creed writes of “... a monstrous creature that is male and phallic yet also deeply connected to the domain of the primary uncanny” (Creed xviii) she could be describing Bunny.

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<sup>13</sup> For some time I believed the forename of Cave’s anti-hero originated from an exhibition by John Hillcoat’s wife and Cave’s friend and neighbour, Polly Borland, entitled *Bunny*, which would have exhibited around the time Cave was discussing the screenplay with Hillcoat (Borland). *Bunny* is a series of playful and provocative studies of Gwendoline Christie in which dress-ups and body distortions diffuse the sex fantasy elements of the poses. It has a more feminised and humorous attitude to the female body than the hungry detail that characterises Cave’s novel. But Cave knew a female secretary in Berlin named Bunny, so perhaps Borland appropriated the name from Cave. Or could Christie be the girl that Cave knew in Berlin with Bunny as a nickname? Cave has always moved in a milieu of artists that inspire and spark off each other and this is yet another example. One of the more salacious *Bunny* photos graces the original Australian edition of Cave’s novel.

<sup>14</sup> As a sufferer of violence, Bunny is further feminised (Edwards 61). He is kicked by an irate husband before whom he cowers pathetically on page 199 and further emasculated when beaten up by a female customer on page 133.

Cave's monster, like Dracula, has been around for a long time: his darkest habits, as we shall see, have been inherited. Unlike vampires, his abominations thrive in daylight: he is an archetype. The demise of this monster will not so much re-set the social order as improve it. Unless, of course, his inheritance continues. Wood describes how audiences often sympathise with monsters, pointing to the attractive wit and intelligence of Shakespeare's Richard III and Boris Karloff's sensitive portrayal of the creature in James Whale's film *Frankenstein* (1931) (Wood 32). Creed concurs that: "There is always something attractive in looking at the frightening or forbidden, such as the human male (or female) in one of its monstrous guises" (Creed 33). Buchbinder suggests that comedy leads to empathy: "Laughter has a way of naturalizing and accepting the object laughed at, because, in order to laugh at something, we have in the first place to accept it to some degree" (Buchbinder 163). Does Cave succumb to the trap of satire, in which the audience empathises with the character being satirised, even while they are aware s/he is a figure of fun? Dame Edna, Homer Simpson and even *Breaking Bad*'s Walter White are as much adored as they are disdained. But before Cave destroys his monster, he darkens his tale. Laughter gives way to shock as Bunny sexually assaults a dying woman.<sup>15</sup> Cave then reveals Bunny has long been a serial rapist, drugging his victims with "Roofies" (Rohypnol) (Cave *Bunny*, 221).

Bunny is more aggressive than the simpering, sexually frustrated grumblers of *Grinderman*, whose grumpy old men come across as ineffectual. In the songs, rape is either "consensual" ("Go Tell the Women") or defused by laughter from its intended victim ("No Pussy Blues"). We have seen that the male characters in *Grinderman* are defined by their relationship to women. Bunny, who identifies himself as a seducer and successful seller of cosmetics, is defined by his perceived effect on women, but unlike the males in the songs, Bunny can rape. Of all the male characters on the *Grinderman* disc, Bunny is closest to the predator in the title track who stalks through the same "silver rain" that drenches Electric Alice in the previous song.

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<sup>15</sup> I believe this scene also reveals its screenplay origins. It happens in a darkened den with a discarded guitar producing feedback. One can imagine this soundtrack being unnerving in a film, but the aural element falls a little flat in the novel.

Sex is presented as something men want and women submit to or refuse. Female sexuality is not present in either book or disc. In *Bunny Munro* women have sex via seduction, force, commerce, pity (because Bunny's wife has just died) or to humiliate sex-crazed men. With the possible exception of Libby in Bunny's memories, women never engage in sex primarily for their own pleasure. One thing that both album and novel share is a preponderance of allusions to militarism and weaponry. In *Bunny Munro*, a prostitute's nipples are compared to "... the triggers on those mines they floated in the sea to blow up ships in the war..." (Cave *Bunny* 8), breasts are "militarised" (54) and likened to torpedoes on three separate occasions (18, 54, 187), backsides are "depth-charged" (54), vaginas are "bullet-proof" (87), and Bunny has a "... fucking rocket in his briefs" (140). There is a "...boob job from Mars" (137) to complement Cave's obsession with that militaristic planet on *Grinderman*. The conflict between the sexes shares a vocabulary in both book and disc.

### **Redemption and Performance**

Accompaniment: "Sorry" (1966) – The Easybeats

There has been much speculation on Nick Cave's attitude to redemption. In interviews, Cave's reaction to it has been contemptuous. When Mark Mordue asked if "... the love of a good woman could redeem a man," Cave's surly response was "How the hell would I know?" (Mordue "Man or Myth?" 83). Cave refused to work on the script for the film of McCarthy's *The Road* because Hollywood "... requires redemptiveness and all that sort of stuff" (Cave qtd. in Sutcliffe 236). Boer suggests redemption is a rare thing in Cave's songs, and that when it does surface it is heavily qualified or contained in small, simple acts of affection (Boer "Redemption" 168). When Boer prospects for redemption in Cave's prose and poetry, the little he uncovers is ambivalent and, Boer suggests, consistent with Calvinistic principles that humans are intrinsically evil and must earn salvation (Boer "The Total Depravity of Nick Cave's Literary World"). It is a struggle to locate redemptive qualities in the *Grinderman* disc. Cave, however, does seem to believe that sustained fiction needs a sliver of optimism, no matter how flimsy: both of his novels have redemptive conclusions. Boer has noted that the relentless squalor of *And the Ass Saw the Angel* is marginally mitigated by

the birth of a boy from Euchrid Eucrow's violation of Beth (Boer "Depravity" 324). The moment barely makes it into the book, being tacked on in an epilogue (Cave *Ass* 311-12) and it is a spurious contender for atonement: despite the joy of the townspeople because the birth fulfils a prophecy, might the scion of Euchrid continue the abominations of his father? It is a glimmer amongst the murk, a moment of hope that almost has to be yearned for by the reader.

In contrast, *The Death of Bunny Munro* contains "... a full-blooded moment of redemption..." (Boer "Depravity" 324). In the final chapters, Bunny crashes his beloved Punto into the ubiquitous cement mixer that has been shadowing him like an angel of death. He has also been struck by a "... pitchfork of lightning..." (Cave *Bunny* 253), as if smitten by Satan. As he lies in the gutter, mortally wounded, he is transported out of time and place to a holiday camp modelled after the Butlins resorts he attended as a child with his father. It was at one of these camps that he had a formative sexual encounter that triggered his Casanova-like confidence and libidinous excess. This transportation from the death scene can be readily interpreted as Bunny's redemptive fantasy, or as a brief visit to some kind of glitzy pre-Heaven or low-rent limbo. Bunny finally has some insight into the disaster of his life and realises his recent rash actions were driven by grief. His conversion is sudden, even if prompted by a brief detour to an apparent Hell where he is sodomised by the Devil, who is a contemptuous admirer. Perhaps being a victim of rape shifts Bunny's thinking.

In a garish ballroom, Bunny stands before the women he has preyed on and explains himself, apologising to them. The scene is set up as a performance, Bunny on stage with the women as audience. The lovingly described kitsch of the ballroom is reminiscent of several Bad Seeds' film clips: the fairy lights and red curtains that surround Cave during "In the Ghetto" (1984) and the proscenium that features in "Straight to You" (1992), where a variety of vaudevillian acts stroll on to entertain during the instrumental breaks. This scene setting is problematic. It seems that, at the moment when Bunny should be at his most sincere, he is framed by a tacky stage where hackneyed acts strut their stuff. Is it meant to look hypocritical? Or is it ironic that Bunny the performer is at his most honest on a stage? After all, Cave himself has noted that his own stage presence combines honesty with parody (Casimir). Emma McEvoy, in a study of Cave's film clips, recognises that many of the Bad Seeds' videos contain



theatrical elements, and notes "... theatricalisation in the work of Cave and the Bad Seeds is a guarantee not of insincerity or falseness but passion" (McEvoy 83). McEvoy writes: "The theatrical setting has been a mode in which to reach that which is outside the mundane; it is the stuff of transcendence" (84). The Bad Seeds' music is dramatic and they have a formidable reputation as a live act, contrasting thunderous energy with lilting melody during gigs. They ignore musical fads, often teetering towards triteness: in the backwash of grunge they churned out cheesy organ riffs in "Straight to You" (1992) and "Red Right Hand" (1994). McEvoy believes the listener is meant to acknowledge the tackiness: "On earlier albums [Mick] Harvey's Hammond organ gave a sense of temporal dislocation, of ironic nostalgia, and added to the almost tangible sense of the variety of texture" (86).

Bunny's stage appearance may also be informed by Cave's interest in the final shambolic shows of Elvis Presley in Las Vegas. "[Cave] believed that Presley on stage, in an advanced state of disintegration, finally presented the truth about himself and with such passion that his performance was totally uncontrived" (Johnston 146). Bunny, too, is in a state of disintegration, although he has had a chance to compose and prepare himself in a chalet before showtime. Cave, therefore, may not be framing Bunny in an insincere setting, according to his own perception of stagecraft. Bad Seeds' fans might recognise this and register Bunny's apology as honest and heartfelt. Readers unfamiliar with Cave's live performances may be more bemused.

But there is another problem: if this scene is indeed a fantasy, is it genuinely redemptive? The women are not in actual fact receiving an apology: rather, Bunny is indulging in a redemptive act that rids him of shame. If it is some kind of pre-emptive Heaven, then at least his wife Libby is there to witness his remorse. Bunny's other victims, still living, would not be present, unless drawn there by some supernatural agency unexplained by Cave. Earlier in the novel, Bunny Junior has been reading about Near-Death Experiences, in which people leave their bodies and encounter religious figures and dead loved ones, before experiencing feelings of peace (Cave *Bunny* 213-14). It is never made clear if these experiences are supernatural events or subjective mind-play, but before Bunny hits the Butlins stage he is told a joke about a junkie who shoots up curry powder and lapses into a "korma" (263). Is Bunny lying unconscious in the

rain, lightning-struck and existing in a timeless world inside his comatose head, much like the cop in the TV series *Life On Mars* (2006-2007), which was also named after a song? At the beginning of the Butlins sequence, Bunny Junior looks up the meaning of the word “fantasy” in his encyclopaedia: “A fantasy is a situation imagined by an individual which does not correspond with reality but expresses certain desires or aims of its creator” (260). Importantly, even if this is Bunny’s fried and fevered imagination, the scene is redemptive for the reader, who, like Libby, witnesses Bunny’s “testimony” (as long as the reader considers him sincere in such an artificial setting).

Curiously, as Bunny waits in the wings of the Butlins ballroom stage, shoring himself up to face the hordes he has abused, he meets a kind of “spirit guide”: a sax player in a gaudy green velour jacket. The description of this figure makes him sound like an avatar of the author. He is a “... tall, lean looking figure standing, like a tower of obtuse angles, in the shadows.” He is a “... blue-eyed, handsome man in his early fifties” (Cave’s age at the time of authorship) with a cigarette listing limply from his lips (a regular prop for Cave before he gave up drugs for clean living and art)<sup>16</sup> (262). Strangely, the musician wears a hairnet (harking back, perhaps, to the feminised pink hair curlers in “Get It On”), but he also sports a black moustache, an important component of Cave’s Grinderman era persona. The sax player emphasises that “the missus” doesn’t like the facial hair, but it is “a commitment” (262). In short, it’s a man thing and perhaps part of the saxophonist’s on-stage look. The musician recognises the performer in Bunny: ““What are you?” he asks. ‘A joke man, a magician, a singer?’” and Bunny accedes to being “... something like that” (262). It is this figure that tells the korma joke. Is this Cave intruding into his own novel, much as John Fowles infiltrates a train carriage in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969) in order to decide the fate of his protagonist (Fowles 408-10)? Importantly, the author/saxophonist encourages Bunny to plunge ahead with his redemptive speech (““Knock ‘em dead, brother,’ says the musician, and he pats Bunny on the back” [Cave *Bunny* 265]). He also underscores what might be considered the “take-away message” of the novel, a much quoted line from W.H. Auden’s poem *September 1 1939*: “We must love one another or die” (Auden). Cave intones the

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<sup>16</sup> See Gambotto’s hilarious description of a zonked Cave trying to light a cigarette from the fake coals of an electric heater (Gambotto 40).

line with quiet gravitas in the audio-book (Cave and Ellis *The Death of Bunny Munro* disc 7, track 5). It seems appropriate to quote from Auden's musings on the outbreak of global war in the thick of Cave's gender conflict. But more of Auden later.

### **Redemption and Inheritance**

Accompaniment: "Father and Son" (1970) – Cat Stevens

Bunny's testimony is tricky, but I believe the truly redemptive thrust of the novel is more effectively handled and lies not with Bunny's abrupt need to apologise, but with the father/son relationships depicted in the narrative. But before I move onto that, I would like to reiterate: what is Cave trying to suggest about the unreconstructed male in *Grinderman* and *Bunny Munro*? Is he inferring there is a primal, unevolved drive beneath the sophisticated surface of every man that sets him in conflict with women? Or is the unreconstructed man as destined to die as Bunny from the opening sentence of Cave's book? Cave has emphasized in interviews that the *Grinderman* songs convey the preoccupations of an aging male (Amorosi 6). "No Pussy Blues" is clearly the lament of an older man – "My face is finished, my body's gone" (Cave, "No Pussy Blues") – so perhaps these antique archetypes are reaching their due-by date?

Raymond Williams theorises that every culture is a product of a dynamic interplay of three elements: the dominant, the residual and the emergent. The latter two elements are subordinate to the dominant, and may be incorporated into it in a diluted or reinterpreted form (Williams 121-27). Thus, emergent elements of gay culture may be absorbed into the mainstream, although watered down to reduce threat, so that, for example, it becomes acceptable for a heteronormative man to disco dance. Residual elements are formulations from the past that are "... still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present" (122). Buchbinder applies Williams' theory to cultural perceptions of masculinity, positing the cowboy as an example of the residual, an older ideal that still echoes within popular culture (Buchbinder 158), most recently in Christopher Nolan's film about space pioneers, *Interstellar* (2014). He also implicates the brooding Byronic figure, popularly reconfigured as the vampire in, for example, the

*Twilight* books (2005-2008) (159) and an image uncomfortably close to Cave's own. Cave's characters fall into the category of residual masculinity, their attitudes still resonant within the culture, but will they eventually become what Williams terms "archaic" – a cultural element in aspic, belonging totally to the past?

The *Grinderman* songs were conceived by a bunch of blokes scrumming and slumming in a "basement" (or recording studio) and experimenting with how much political incorrectness they could get away with. It is tempting to draw analogies with *Loaded*, the flagship magazine of the New Lads in the nineties, which carried the banner: "for men who should know better" (Edwards 39). The magazine had a knowing naughtiness but many critics considered its leering irony to be merely an excuse for regression, or "... reactionary or retreatist retro-sexism" (Imelda Whelehan ctd. in Edwards 40). John Beynon insists that New Laddism "... remains a way of affirming masculinity without confronting or questioning it and ... mags like *Loaded* and *Later*, in which its purest expression is to be found, are for men but certainly not about them" (Beynon 119). Yet, despite its jock-like jocularity, Cave refuses to dismiss *Grinderman* as asinine fun: "I feel as connected to the songs as any others – though maybe they don't appear to be as deeply personal, which mostly they are – I do. They're just further developments" (Cave qtd. in Amorosi 6). The characters on the album are newly posed on their hindquarters; they have been thawed from the ice (of a former era – an Ice Age?) and pulled from the "tar pits" like the fossilised bones of a mastodon (Cave and Grinderman "Get It On"). Driven by their urges, they are little further along the evolutionary scale than the ape on the cover. They are not redeemed: they remain sexually unsated ("No Pussy Blues"), deny their previous proclamations of independence ("(I Don't Need You to) Set Me Free"), literally become insubstantial ("Love Bomb") or petulantly flee ("Go Tell the Women"). There is no suggestion they will reform or learn, or that anything will improve for them. They will remain in conflict with the opposite sex. They are parodied but there is no indication they will not endure, except for the physically dissipating narrator of "Love Bomb." The question of their longevity remains unanswered in the songs.

Not so in *Bunny Munro*. There are many references to Bunny being a fossil: an archetype that no longer flourishes. Charlotte, one of Bunny's

customers, asks if he crawled from the very tar pits that give rise to the rock star in “Get It On,” and suggests: “You should be embalmed and have a sign hung around your neck saying ‘extinct’” (Cave *Bunny* 130). She likens him to a dodo. At one point Bunny feels like “... an extinct volcano” (46) and throughout the novel we are reminded his days are numbered. Bunny knows he is a goner but does nothing to avert or prepare for his fate, and even feels comfort in the knowledge (56), surrendering to the inevitable as if it is deserved. The question is, will Bunny’s type die with him? It is evident that most of Bunny’s vices have been inherited from his vitriolic, chain-smoking, exploitative, booze-addled father<sup>17</sup> (78). In turn, Bunny spends most of the novel trying to impart his view of women, the world and salesmanship onto his own son, to “show him the ropes,” as his father did with him. In a late chapter, Bunny and his son visit the patriarch as he decays away in an old people’s home. Bunny Senior is a venomous misanthrope who begs Bunny Junior to continue the line of damage, the diseased branch of the family tree: “I hope you break his [Bunny’s] heart. I hope you break it like he broke mine” (242).

In his lecture, “The Secret Life of the Love Song,” Cave evokes W. H. Auden<sup>18</sup> to explain how his artistic life has been shaped and motivated by the death of his father:

The loss of my father, I found, created in my life a vacuum, a space in which my words began to float and collect and find their purpose. The great W.H. Auden said “The so-called traumatic experience is not an accident, but the opportunity for which the child has been patiently waiting – had it not occurred, it would have found another – in order that its life become a serious matter.” The death of my father was the “traumatic experience” Auden talks about that left the hole for God to fill. How beautiful the notion that we create our own personal catastrophes and that it is the creative forces within us that are instrumental in doing this. We each have a need to create and sorrow is a creative act. (Cave “Secret” 1)

Parental loss as muse is given expression in “Man in the Moon,” the only sensitive song on *Grinderman*. In an achingly sad eulogy, Cave reaffirms his artistic slavery to his father’s memory: “Sitting here scratching in this empty

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<sup>17</sup> Bunny also seems to have inherited his taste for animal-themed clothes. Note Bunny the First’s polar bear jumper (page 239).

<sup>18</sup> Auden is name-checked in the 2004 song “Hiding All Away” (although his name is rhymed with “boredom,” the narrator’s lover regarding the writers the narrator has recommended with ennui).

room / Scratching and a-tapping to the man in the moon / About all the things that I've been taught / My daddy was an astronaut" (Cave and Grinderman "Moon").<sup>19</sup> For Cave, the love song embraces parental and religious devotion, as well as romantic love: "It is a howl in the void, for love and for comfort and it lives on the lips of the child crying for its mother. It is the song of the lover in need of her loved one, the raving of the lunatic supplicant petitioning his God" (Cave "Secret" 1). This is a major difference between Cave's concept of the love song and the world I have created for my narrator in *Earworm*. Many consider the love song to be sugary and sentimental: simplistic, inane and perhaps emotionally exploitative. Paul McCartney famously characterised them as "silly" (McCartney and McCartney). Cave dismisses such examples from his definition, classifying them – perhaps ironically given his own penchant for violence – as "hate songs" (Cave "Secret" 2). My narrator – the fictional tune "Empty Fairground" – also has strong opinions concerning the worth of the love song. "Empty Fairground" is meaningful to many. Thousands of admirers identify closely with it, using it to revive memories and define identity. This tops my narrator with hubris, making it arrogant and opinionated. It asserts itself as a major art work, able to express succinctly what it takes a novel hundreds of pages to deliver. It aligns itself to more ineffable forms of expression such as painting. Like Cave, it believes sadness adds poignancy. Unlike Cave, it does not accept filial affection as an expression of true love. "Empty Fairground" is an ode to romance. As such, it does not understand parental devotion and indeed, considers it an evolutionary con:

Nature forces you to bond with your child so you'll protect it. Try to force a human to do anything else and they bristle and complain, but show me the protest song about being strongarmed into caring for your kid. There isn't one. No "Free the Genes" or "Make Love Not Wards." The offspring are equally compromised: learning to adore their parents through dependency. There's nothing magical or spiritual about these connections. It's filial fascism. Viva la evolution. (Varney 200)

My narrator would be baffled by Cave's nomination of his father's loss as Auden's spur to creativity.

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<sup>19</sup> See also the gunpowder trail to his father's heart ignited by supplicating young fans in "We Call Upon the Author to Explain" from the following Bad Seeds' disc *Dig, Lazarus, Dig!!!* (2008).

Auden, of course, receives a name check in *Bunny Munro*. The line from *September 1 1939* is introduced by one of Bunny's customers, the blind, elderly Mrs Brooks (Cave *Bunny* 173). She repeats the quote later as, unbeknownst to her, Bunny pockets her rings. A hotel receptionist, appalled by the horrors of modern life, reinterprets the sentiment as: "If we could all just be a bit nicer to one another!" (202). The backstage Cave-clone saxophonist misquotes it slightly – "We've got to love one another or die, brother" – and emphasises it with the follow up: "'It's super-glue, baby,' says the musician, and blows softly into his saxophone. 'It keeps the heart of the world pumping'" (264).

As readers, we have to put blind faith in the Auden quote: there is little in the desperate, self-centred world of *Bunny Munro* to give it credence, unless you count the loving ghost of Bunny Junior's mother or the solicitous uniformed women, a policewoman and a nurse, that assist Bunny Junior and Bunny's father, respectively. This "message," coming out of nowhere, is rather clumsy. Are we to take it seriously? Removed from the context of Auden's poem and with little in the novel to boost its credibility, it has all the banality of a Hallmark card. Auden himself grew to distrust the line, removing the stanza that contained it before allowing *September 1 1939* to be represented in his *Collected Poems*. Auden considered the line "... a damned lie" (Wormser 418) and a betrayal of reason, attempting to rewrite it as "We must love one another and die," before omitting the poem altogether from further collections (M. L. Williams 74). I've discovered it is still quite difficult to locate a copy of the poem in print. The line has endured, however, appearing in a sensationalist television commercial for Lyndon Johnson's election campaign in 1964,<sup>20</sup> and being dusted off for another September disaster and prelude to war after the fall of the twin towers in 2001 (M. L. Williams 77-78). At least Mark Mordue might feel vindicated after Cave's dismissal of his query concerning the love of a good woman: apparently Cave does now embrace love's powers of salvation. And Auden, the death of cherished fathers and redemption seem to form an oedipal closed circuit in Cave's mind.

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<sup>20</sup> The commercial, *Daisy*, can be found on You Tube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dDTBnsqxZ3k>, viewed 13 February 2015.

Cave claims he was nineteen<sup>21</sup> (Cave "Secret" 1) and being bailed out of St. Kilda police station by his mother when he heard his father had been killed in an automobile accident (Conrad 3). One of Boer's examples of redemptive song writing in "Love, Pain, and Redemption in the Music of Nick Cave" is "Nature Boy" (2004) from *Abattoir Blues/The Lyre of Orpheus*. Boer refers to the verse:

I was just a boy when I sat down  
To watch the news on TV  
I saw some ordinary slaughter  
I saw some routine atrocity  
My father said, don't look away  
You got to be strong, you got to be bold, now  
He said, that in the end it is beauty  
That is going to save the world, now. (lyrics qtd. in Mordue "Man or Myth?" 84)

Again, it is the father that influences the son, and perhaps encourages him to create some beauty of his own in the form of art.<sup>22</sup>

Towards the end of Cave's novel, Bunny Junior also receives sage parental advice. He is visited by the ghost of his dead mother, Libby, although it is never made clear if these hauntings are real or in the boy's imagination (Bunny sees the ghost too, but never at the same time as his son. She is always presented from the characters' points of view and can readily be interpreted as a psychological manifestation of grief). The ghost tells Bunny Junior he is protected and warns him a tragedy is impending (the death readers have been reminded of since opening the book). She urges him to be strong: "I want you to persevere. Do you understand?" (Cave *Bunny* 224). Libby's exhortations reflect the parental encouragement given in "Nature Boy," but Cave subverts his own song by having the advice conveyed by the mother. Under her influence Bunny Junior begins to see through his treasured father's inadequacies and reappraise his erratic behaviour. Under Bunny's aegis, the boy envisions himself as a helpless passenger on a plane with a drunken pilot mishandling the controls (219). The father/son responsibilities flip and the boy becomes the carer. He props his father up as Bunny's physical and mental condition deteriorates. He improves his father's dishevelled appearance with a flower in a buttonhole (211), picks him up when he falls (213) and tends to his scraped knee with a solicitous

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<sup>21</sup> Johnston claims he was twenty-one (Johnston 56).

<sup>22</sup> Taken out of context, one can imagine "beauty... is going to save the world, now" being on the Hallmark card beside the one with the Auden quote.



“There you go” (214). When Bunny dissolves into helpless sobbing before his own father, it is the dry-eyed Bunny Junior who takes control and shields Bunny from harm. During their travels around Brighton, Bunny Junior has been in charge of the maps and when his spectral mother informs him that his father is lost, Bunny Junior proudly responds: “That’s OK Mummy... I am the navigator” (224). Towards the end of Bunny’s Butlins fantasy, father and son ride on a children’s mini-train and Bunny insists his son drives. Bunny Junior progresses from helpless passenger to navigator to driver. In fact, one possible reading of the novel is that Libby suicides in order to set in motion the events that lead to Bunny’s demise and redemption and the salvation of her son. She had certainly made preparations before her death, leaving a leaning tower of pizza for her family and buying suits for them to don for her funeral.

Bunny Junior’s attitude to women differs from that of his father. He develops a quick affinity with a girl on a bicycle (while Bunny is having sex with her mother) who is wearing provocative clothing akin to that of the Bratz dolls that were decried during *Woman’s Hour* (161-64). Thinking back to the girl later, the boy wants to inform her that “... as she grows up maybe she doesn’t have to turn into one of them – cock-a-doodling up the street all the time” (referring to the sound the girl says her mother makes during sex) (229). Bunny Junior has taken on board the issue of the commercial sexualisation of children, while his father has merely appropriated it as part of his shtick. The issue is not something Bunny would seriously ponder: he ogles many under-aged girls, including his neighbour, Cynthia. Just before conversing with his dead mother, Bunny Junior is fascinated to learn of the midwife toad, the male of which carries the eggs until they hatch (222). One can imagine Bunny, who is terrified by the responsibilities of fatherhood, being baffled by this fact.<sup>23</sup>

Cave, perhaps in a spurt of wish fulfilment or an attempt at personal redemption via art/fantasy, places Junior at his father’s side as Bunny lies dying after a car accident. The boy has been prepared for the moment by his mother. As

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<sup>23</sup> Bunny Junior loves trawling through an encyclopaedia that was given to him by his mother. Various facts from it are presented throughout the novel. Cave is known to keep encyclopaedias in his writing office, along with dictionaries, thesauri and Polly Borland’s photographs (Sutcliffe 212). In a similar vein to *Bunny Munro*, random facts about cosmology and the Higgs’ boson turn up in a number of songs on Cave’s 2013 album, *Push the Sky Away*, although apparently these were sourced from Wikipedia. As Cave notes: “Wikipedia is Heaven” (Cave and Ellis “We Real Cool”)

adults rush in to protect him, Bunny Junior refuses their solicitations "... and, standing, stands up above" (278). Bunny Junior is the "navigator" with "a good little heart" (224). He is more in touch with his inner self than his father, including his feminine side, as represented by his bond with his mother and his fascination with the midwife toad. Perhaps Bunny Junior is an example of Raymond Williams' emergent cultural elements (Williams 123-24)? There is a strong suggestion that the line of paternal inheritance has been broken. The misogynistic, unreconstructed male represented by Bunny looks destined for extinction. This, and Bunny Junior's final act of independence and self-possession, is, I believe, the true redemptive heart of *The Death of Bunny Munro*. Cave was not present during his own father's demise, instead rather shamefully being freed from a cell. The son that is distant during the father's death is deeply affected by him, yet Bunny Junior, there at his father's side, is inspired by his mother. One father's influence on a son drives him to write a novel about a son that shakes off the influence of a father.

### **Conclusion:**

Accompaniment: "We Call Upon the Author to Explain" (2008) – Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds

It is impossible to read *The Death of Bunny Munro* without being aware it was written by a musician. Musical allusions appear early, with Cave describing the changes in Libby's voice as the difference between "soft cellos" and "a high rasping violin" on the first page. Further examples include Bunny's forelock being "... artfully arranged into something musical, like a treble clef or a fiddlehead" (93), "... on the soft-pedal, a note of anxious expectation..." (261), a "trumpeting mastodon" (192) and "... down in the bassbins he hears the infrasonic reverberations of thunder" (192). There are many others, including a sacrilegious conflation of the sacred and singing Madonnas (55). As with any artist, a familiarity with their larger body of production adds to the interpretation and appreciation of any individual work. We have seen that an awareness of The Bad Seeds' use of theatricality and unfashionable musical modes can aid in assessing the sincerity of Bunny Munro's apology to his victims. The aging and frustrated throwbacks that populate the *Grinderman* tunes reflect the male

grotesques of *Bunny Munro*, complete with their lingering odour of tar pits. Some intersections of the novel with Cave's larger career seem intended not to enhance the fiction, but rather to promote the myth of Cave. Cave has long been aware of his status as a legend. His solo tour in 1983 carried the banner "Nick Cave: Man or Myth?", itself an in-joke on a foreword Colin Cave wrote for the book *Ned Kelly: Man and Myth* (1968) (Mordue "Man or Myth?" 87). Myth is intricately interwoven into Cave's sense of his creative identity. In *The Sick Bag Song* (2015) he writes: "Memory is imagined; it is not real. Don't be ashamed of its need to create; it is the loveliest part of your heart. Myth is the true history" (Cave qtd. in Mordue "Rock Odyssey"). This may be why Cave feels that his personality has been co-opted by his persona, as described in the opening minutes of *20,000 Days on Earth*. Bunny Munro frequently expresses his carnal crush on Kylie Minogue and Cave is well known for the duet with his fellow expatriot, "Where the Wild Roses Grow" (1996). Bunny haunts Brighton, Cave's current home – which also features in songs such as "Jubilee Street" (2013) – and the gangly saxophonist is a Cave caricature in all but choice of instrument and dress sense. One can almost feel the author flashing a conspiratorial wink. Even the death of Cave's father, mirrored at the novel's conclusion, is an integral part of the Cave myth.

In *Earworm*, allusion to music creates the voice of the narrator and constructs the world in which the narrator operates. Musical words and imagery are woven into *Earworm* to demonstrate how songs are inextricably knitted into our memories and identities and to build the myths surrounding the hit "Empty Fairground." Puns and in-jokes help to sustain my narrator's point of view: it refers to quietness as "4'33'" in homage to John Cage's piece of the same name (1952) that utilises silence (Varney 117) and, being a traditional love song, it employs euphemism to denote fornication (unless reporting dialogue) (119, 128). Despite my narrator's disdain for authors, there is harmony between fiction and music. The novelist Kazuo Ishiguro claims his apprenticeship for prose was the narrative songs he composed before he abandoned his dream to be a singer/songwriter to attend creative writing courses (Krider 147). Music psychologist Victoria J. Williamson cites evidence that musical therapy, especially that involving rhythm, may help to support language learning and assist with reading difficulties in children (Williamson 210-12) and writers love

to use musical metaphors to describe their work. In relation to her narrators, Joyce Carol Oates has said: "The character on the page determines the prose – its music, its rhythms, the range and limit of its vocabulary – yet at the outset at least, I determine the character" (Oates qtd. in Yagoda 181). This is a neat summary of the construction of the voice and world of my narrator, trapped within the consciousnesses of humans and trying to interpret their passions, convictions and actions via the lore of the love song. But my creation would never let an author have the last word, so I'll conclude with my narrator's self-assessment from page 52 of *Earworm*:

"I may not be a ballad but I know how to tell a story."

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Earworm (Excerpt)

Track Three: Solo: Spencer

by Colin Varney

Rewind. Hit repeat. One... more... time.

The morning after the encounter with the alleyway roué behind the restaurant where she worked – the night she smooched Steve the waiter against the siren-wailing sedan – Nicole slouched in the darkened lounge of Bryce's house. She moped before the TV screen, its glacial glow giving her a goth makeover. She'd hoped daytime telly would anaesthetise her, but the sit-coms and talk shows sluiced through her, unable to fill the emptiness yawning inside. I sulked in a corner, eager to push forward, but she kept me at bay.

So I skimmed. I flew; I globetrotted. I made a quick inventory of the craniums I crammed. I was everywhere at once: an electron cloud around your atom planet. iPod god. CD deity. In Glasgow, a musician used me for a scratch mix. In Katherine, a woman played me on harmonica to make her dog howl. In a suburb of Adelaide, a man wandered an empty flat, desultorily flicking the peeling wallpaper. His nostrils twinged at the must of mildew. Small windows gave the room the oppressiveness of a cell, reluctantly admitting reflected light from a laneway. There was a view of brick and a broken drainpipe. A woman in a stern skirt courageously accentuated the advantages of the place. It was a short walk to the beach, where there was, apparently, a vibrant restaurant culture. The apartment was ideal for a single occupant, yet commodious enough for – her pause was followed by an upward inflection that made the word sound lewd – guests.

"Apartment?" Spencer cast a sceptical look at his surroundings. He was thinking of airports. Why was that? "The walls must be paper thin. Hear that music?" He looked around. He couldn't work out if it was coming from next door, or the "apartment" above.

I guttered in Spencer's head. Fading in and out. Made of wisps. I knew I wouldn't be there long: I couldn't gain any traction. Yet I had a feeling of déjà vu. Imagine you came across Keith Richards fifty years ago. Arrogantly youthful, saturninely handsome. Satin fleshed. Then your life spooled on and you paid no more attention to him until you saw him again, fifty seconds ago. Rutted, cratered, sultana-ed. You might pause, creasing your features in poor impersonation of Keith, wondering where you'd seen him

before. That's how I felt as I shimmered in Spencer's consciousness. It was familiar, but rundown.

Yes, definitely déjà vu: a feeling rather than a memory. My own memory is an enigma; a mystery to me. Sometimes I seem to be merely a mosaic of the memories of others. A gestalt gadabout. Yet I have a strong territoriality. Spencer had my scent on him.

"What music?" asked the real estate agent.

Spencer concentrated. She was right, there was nothing. Only me, echoing between his ears. I was a piecemeal thing consisting of the hook from my chorus and mumbled vocalisations that never consolidated into actual lyrics. A verse stammered embarrassingly before petering out. Something about the flat had conjured me. Memories bobbed past like bubbles; as I tried to grasp them they popped. I cupped one and glimpsed another dingy lounge room, far back in Spencer's history. There's a figure, but I can't make her out. There's an impression of black and yellow striped leggings and an eruption of red hair.

Spencer fought to eject me. I was a phantom with nothing solid to sustain my grip. Hectored spectre. But as I felt myself being shaken free, I realised why he was inspecting the flat. He planned to leave his wife. He was looking for somewhere to run. Or dreaming of driving to the airport and catching a plane. Destination: anywhere.

Then Spencer burst from around me like one of those popped bubbles.

Spencer who? I didn't miss him. I continued my inventory, checking on my hosts: their cheers and fears, joys and ploys. Some were preparing great celebrations; others were plotting put-downs and humiliations. I'm no critic – I don't judge. But I do know that I'm a product of human creativity, so I suspect you lot can't be all bad. I checked on Nicole and found her dozing off to *Dr. Phil*.

I was surprised when I sputtered back in Spencer's head later that day. An office shimmered about him, solidifying into focus. His elbow rested on a desk, beside a framed photo of a serene, plump-faced newborn with a severe ridge of forehead. A row of people perched before him, perusing photocopied sheets. To his right were shelves stuffed with textbooks: treatises on journalistic ethics, media diversity, the importance of balance in political reporting. Closer to hand, arrayed across the desk, were investigative non-fiction by Mailer, Wolfe, Hitchens, David Marr.

I had the impression there were many sets of inert, beady eyes at his back. What was that all about?



As Spencer's mind coalesced around me I realised the supplicants before him were his students and he was their tutor. I saw that he was uneasy about this, almost guilty. Not that he considered himself a bad teacher. Rather, he felt like a musician in a wedding band, punching out popular standards for the inebriated merrymakers. Assured of his skills, strumming with a fixed grin, but unable to believe in the material even as he admired the enthusiasm of the dancers. Many wedding combos have treated me that way. Haughty sixty-forty.

Spencer was testy with the text books. Yet he revered the clutch of investigative works cluttering his desk, as if they were beautifully constructed instruments he could never hope to play.

I was insubstantial within him; an eerie backing vocal. There was no music in the room and I wondered what had summoned me. Spencer was fixed on one of the students. Marla was bundled in a bomber jacket despite the warmth of late spring. A blond wig in a sixties pageboy style curtained pallid cheeks. Her features were careworn. She was older than the others – Spencer guessed early forties. He imagined her at home, trying to find a quiet place to study while teenagers hurtled around her. She read with beetling intensity, her scanning pupils occasionally halting to interrogate a sentence. Then the network of creases around her eyes would deepen into asterisks and her right leg would bounce on the fulcrum of her toes.

She gave the impression she was late for something.

It was Marla that connected me to Spencer. No, not quite – something about Marla reminded Spencer of the figure with the leggings in the bubble memory. It was her restlessness, her caged energy. The notion that she needed to be elsewhere. And thoughts of the smudged shade in black and yellow hose made me percolate in Spencer's brain. As he scrutinised Marla I solidified. I felt friction. And then – whoa yeah! – he clicked an index finger on his desk top. He gave a gravelly rasp at the back of his throat: an absent-minded sound doodle.

Let's hear it for me!

Marla snuffled and rolled a balled fist beneath her nose to wipe it. She targeted his tranced croaking.

"What's that?" she asked.

Spencer's finger froze as he snapped from his spell. Friction vanished. I scrabbled.

"What's what, Marla?"

"That thing you were humming."

“I wasn’t humming anything.”

Yes, he really believed that. I can do that to humans. You think you’re evolution’s darling but I can bamboozle you so easily.

Marla cleared her throat and glared at his finger. It was still raised, about to strike. Spencer tried to recall what he’d been rapping. Hopefully a jazz jam from Coltrane or Miles Davis, but it could as easily have been Kylie. He hoped he hadn’t been reproducing something from a TV talent quest.

“I don’t know what it was, Marla,” he admitted. “Something random.”

“Know it. Can’t place it.” She attempted to reproduce me with vague vocal scat. It dwindled. “Too lame. Needs a bevy heat.”

“Heavy beat?” Spencer was used to Marla’s speeding words crashing into each other.

“Yeah. You weren’t doing it right.”

Spencer felt obscurely affronted. He cast a backward glance. Behind him were two shelves lined with a parade of dolls. Raggy figures slumped beside plastic clones; Barbies cuddled against Cindys in a trademark truce. As his gaze swept along them, brief flashes of how he came by each one blipped: the op-shop finds, the market stalls, the toy departments. Bright scenes, stretching back in time like strung beads. At the end of the thread there was something else: something black and foreboding, churning like a storm. As if a long line had snagged a frightening creature in the depths. I ventured to make contact but something like a massive charge blew me back.

Spencer squirmed. He felt he’d been belittled before his cloth and polymer brood. He reassured them with a mask of parental authority before turning back.

“Of course I was doing it right.”

“How do you know if you don’t know what it was?”

Spencer watched amusement transform Marla’s face. Laughter lines buried the asterisks at her eyes. Pale cheeks issued a lunar light. Moon bloom. She wasn’t in her forties. Younger.

He pictured himself driving to the airport again. But now Marla was in the passenger seat. And look, those cheeks are pale no longer. They prickle with pink. I checked for a baby bump, wondering where those hurtling teenagers had disappeared to. Marla had crossed a line in Spencer’s head: a boundary as uncertain as the one that separated punk from new wave.

He shook the vagary free before I could get a grip on it, but I'd seen enough to realise I'd misunderstood him earlier. The driving scene had been playful; bedecked in technicolour. He wasn't plotting to leave his wife, he was merely idling with the idea. Like noodling on an instrument without seriously playing. I chided myself. I take pride in my expertise with thought and fancy, but this time I'd confused scheme with dream.

"Perhaps we need to concentrate on the handout," Spencer advised coolly.

Just as I was becoming intrigued, he sloughed me away like a dog shaking itself dry.

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In Darwin, a couple supped from stubbies and danced naked to me in the warm afternoon wet. In Melbourne, a student researching her PhD on me was becoming too obsessed: it was like fending off an over-enthusiastic admirer. In Hobart, Nicole was ignoring another of Heinrich's pesky cold calls. There was plenty to occupy me. For a brief moment I regretted not grasping that misty mirage of leggings and big hair and I admit to a certain cautious curiosity concerning that black storm memory, but then I was busy with a chorus of other consciousnesses.

Until...

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Flicker falter. Firefly in a fog. It took a while to realise I was back in Spencer's scone. Things were muddled; muddied. Fusty thoughts. Spencer tipped at a tumbler and cheap scotch seared his upper palate. He ambled around his lounge, dum-de-dahing: so pleased with himself for making up a ditty that he performed a clumsy jig. Except, of course, he had invented nothing. I was pulling the strings and he was dancing to my tune.

I'm accustomed to inhabiting inebriates. Many appreciate me more when they've had a few, bawling me out with ignoble gusto. I'm a smash hit with the smashed.

The only illumination emanated from a television with the sound muted. The shifting sheen of the TV screen made objects tack and toggle around Spencer. Shadows leapt, then cowered. Although alone, Spencer felt surrounded by the presence of his wife. In the jittery light, the posters of the operas Vivienne loved jerked from their frames in feigned attacks. A newspaper on the sofa was folded to a cryptic crossword spotted with

Vivienne's confident jottings; a cup on a low table contained the spicy dregs of her herbal tea. He ran a fingernail along a row of paperbacks with differently coloured spines. The first – *Love is Pink* – was bent out of shape so that it shouldered the others aside. It looked smug: the breakthrough publication; leader of the pack. The final one – *Love is Green* – stuck out as if recently perused.

"Nominated," Spencer muttered.

He tried to suppress his sozzled grin. He resented the pride he felt because Vivienne's last book had been shortlisted for the Eros Prize. His stomach knotted with fear that she might not win. But then he remembered the phone calls he had fielded earlier in the evening. Journalists begging to interview Vivienne about the nomination. Hack flak. The first caller had been one of his ex-students, yet he'd hardly recognised her voice. In class, she'd been driven and idealistic, bordering on excitable. Convinced that one day she would be ferreting out secrets and lies for the public good. Now she was wheedling for access to a minor celebrity in a weary monotone. Crushed crusader. Spencer wondered if the spark died in all of his students. He sighed and broke open the scotch. He was on his third generous nip when Vivienne's agent rang, demanding to know why Spencer had turned the journalists down.

"She's busy, Eva. Writing." Spencer was already slurring. "Someone set her some unrealistic deadlines. Oh, that's right, it was you."

Eva ranted. Spencer sipped loudly to let her know he was drinking, then promised he'd get Vivienne to return her call. He hung up, aware that he hadn't won. He knew Vivienne would initially refuse the interviews, then be talked around by eager beaver Eva. He seethed. How come Vivienne could find time for publicity, but none for him?

He sloshed more scotch into the tumbler and raised the glass to a red-dressed gypsy flouncing from a *Carmen* poster. Suddenly there was another tune in his head, muscling me aside. I so hate competition. We bulldozed against each other. If we'd been able to communicate we might have snarled, but songs are islands. Worlds unto ourselves. I don't mind Nicole's infatuation with other hits because I reign supreme in her bean. I looked forward to kicking the guests out once they'd overstayed their welcome. But this was different. I had no purchase in Spencer. I was slipping on shale. And he was familiar with the interloper. It was the *Habanera* from *Carmen*: he stamped out a paltry parody of flamenco footwork. Boozy Bizet. He smiled as he recalled Vivienne's self-effacing chagrin when she'd admitted this was her favourite aria. As an opera buff she felt she

should celebrate something more arcane, but its infectious melodrama seduced her every time.

Spencer reached out to Vivienne's record player. It looked anachronistic, like an antique phone. Its boxy bulk usually delighted him, but tonight it made him frown. When was the last time she'd laid a black platter on its turntable and let Bizet blare forth? When was the last time she'd played anything. She'd changed the needle only last month, ordering it from a specialty company at great expense, yet her records never left their sleeves.

He was fading from around me now; thoughts fizzing away. The *Habanera* expanded, forcing me aside. Spencer wandered up the hall and peeped through an open door into Vivienne's writing den. She sat rigidly at the computer, her back to him. Flurries of tapping were interspersed with aching pauses. Spencer was entranced by her nape; the sliver of skin there. He had an urge to lean in and inhale, drawing the aroma from under her collar. The warmth beneath her clothes.

Tendrils of red mist tickled into view. In the room, yet not in the room. I was surprised by them, and so was Spencer. Not because his vision was being painted over – he was accustomed to that – but because he knew the Colours only came under strict conditions. One of these was the presence of music. He cocked an ear. Was there enough of a rhythm in the clatter of keys to trigger the Colours?

Hey, buster, what about me? What do you think I am, ricocheting around your shell? I could feel myself in that smoky scarlet, as if I was visible vapour being breathed in front of Spencer. Incarnadine condensation.

Vivienne turned in her chair. She blinked at Spencer blankly. No flicker of recognition. Spooked, he stumbled back, the mist blown from his sight as if by a gust. Then Vivienne shook off her bewitchment and beamed. She noticed the tumbler and her eyes narrowed in mock approbation. She blew him a kiss. He caught it in his left hand. Her grin broadened and she turned back to her...

Bizet's bully bounced me out. I fell away. Or rather, Spencer disintegrated from around me. He effervesced into nothing.

\*\*\*

I returned only minutes later, burning brightly. Images blasted past, vivid and familiar as a recurring nightmare. A deserted Ferris wheel, plaster laughing clowns rotating their

heads in slow denial, a hula doll as a sideshow prize. A hunchback and a hag stumble through a hall of mirrors in which they're reflected back as brawn and babe. They're propelled towards a glass and – splash! – it proves to be a perpendicular pool in which they submerge. Babe and beefcake swim in submarine green, in slanted sunbeams, emerging on a tropic coast, wet clothes cleaved to their curves. My second verse careens towards my chorus.

I have mixed feelings about my film clip. It has a certain charm and I have much affection for it, but it hasn't weathered well. The special effects are clunky and – let's face it – that beauty/beast, mirror/water thing has been done to death. A cocktail of Cocteau. My main objection, though, is that any imagery, cut-price or cutting edge, can never match the set pieces, flavoured by memories, conjured in each individual imagination. Seriously, you humans underappreciate that thing you've got rumbling away up there.

The Joneses filled Spencer's computer screen. My two dads! They were made up to look like cheap prizes from a spruiker's stall. Morris was a Raggedy Ann while Johnny was a Pinocchio puppet. Johnny turns and Morris bobs to avoid the limbo pole proboscis. Dad jokes are so embarrassing.

Morris's dress-up made Spencer think of the dolls in his office.

Cross-legged on his bed, nursing the tumbler, Spencer leered closer to the laptop. The castaway couple were back, embracing in a tropical forest. Desert island desire. Naughty nissology. Spencer was momentarily confounded by his presence in the clip, hovering around the huggers like an oversized genii, until he realised the darkened room was generating his likeness on the screen. A flower dropped from the babe's hair into a stream. It babbled along in the current. At the point in which it toppled over a waterfall there was a freeze frame. The petals were suspended in the spray. I moved towards my triple chorus and fade.

Spencer shivered. It was a pleasant spring night, nudging towards warmth, yet Spencer's domain felt chilly. He thought he could still hear the pitter-patter of his wife typing. He pictured the dexterity of Vivienne's fingertips dancing across the letters and then imagined them quick-stepping over him. His pulse quickened and he became aware of the hiss of his exhalations.

Vivienne's fingers hadn't fox-trotted upon him for some time.

He began my clip again. Unable to recall my name, he'd had trouble locating me on the internet. He'd typed in spurious descriptions of me with one hand, while the

tumbler balanced precariously on the mattress. When he questioned his need to do this he found himself staring at his closed left fist. He still held Vivienne's kiss trapped against his palm. He raised the fist to his cheek and unfurled it, fingertips scraping up over his ear. He closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath.

Spencer studied my clip with a tinge of distaste. I was a pinch too poppy for him and he found my images somewhat banal. The word "commercial" lingered in his mind like a mild obscenity. I can't say I was completely comfortable with this, but I was helping him to graze against the bubble memories. I tried to make him fully grasp them, to bring them to the forefront of thought, but he resisted. It felt wrong to him, especially while he was aware of the tap-tapping digits. The figure in the leggings remained misty.

He eased from his hunch. As he settled against the pillows he heard a muffled crackling. He slithered his hand into the pillowslip and touched paper. He extracted it with a sigh: a printed sheet from his wife's latest chapter. He held it up to the bedside light and scanned it.

*She circled him, each sidelong step bringing her nearer, caught in his gravitational pull. A vein at his temple throbbed, making the delinquent curl that hung there tick and quaver. He didn't snatch but reached for her slowly, hesitating at the last moment before his talons caught her clothing to allow her time to retreat. She did not. She let the clothes pull away from her body a little before relenting, thrilled by the shock of cold air that crept beneath the garments. His expression was calm and confident, his teak coloured irises condensing around the dark pupils. The tiny cicatrix above his left eye, normally elusive as a watermark, became shaded like a fine sketch. Suddenly they were pressed against each other and she felt the knots and cushions of his body. He had still not enclosed her, permitting escape. She grabbed his wrists and forced them around the small of her back...*

At the bottom of the page was a tilted heart and three Xs. The heart appeared to have been drawn with a pen depleted of ink, its lines thready and uncertain. Its top left curve was sunken, as if deflating. The lower spokes of the crosses were longer, while the stunted tops were almost joined by a wisp of ink. An inkling. They looked like the fragile sand-prints of a sidestepping bird.

Spencer itched with resentment. Recent recollections bundled forth: further instances of Vivienne leaving snatches of writing for him to discover. It seemed to be a form of goading: a reminder of the process that was removing her from him. He considered watching my clip again as meagre vengeance, boosting the bubble memories.

Instead he closed the laptop and hunkered beneath bedclothes. He twisted restlessly, needled by notions. When he succumbed to slumber he dreamed of delicate claw prints on a shoreline being obliterated by lapping wavelets.

The tide ran to my rhythm.

\*\*\*

Spencer's gummed eyes peeled open. In his sleep-drugged condition he couldn't decide if he had dreamt the small cry, or if a cry had woken him. He sat up, adjusting the tilt of his head like an aerial searching for a signal. He heard a stumbling, shuffling step.

He rustled out of bed, knuckling his eyes. The hallway was vacant. Through the open doorway of what was sardonically referred to as the "music room," he sensed, rather than saw, the piano crouching in the murk, its pink paint job giving it an unearthly pall. It puffed up to fill the space. The air felt malevolent, billowing out and enveloping him like a stench.

As he moved towards Vivienne's bedroom he la-la-ed a little tune, sotto voce, to ward off evil juju. Stray bars of an air he didn't consciously recognise.

Ladies and gentlemen, this one goes a little something like... me!

Vivienne's bedroom door was ajar. He nudged it open. He was halfway into the gloom before he confirmed the bed was unoccupied.

He slumped.

Vivienne's night moves. It might be something simple tonight: checking to see if the iron was turned off, or the windows latched and the back door properly secured. He could test these things for her, wagging the windows against their catch to show her they were safe, and they could retire to their separate dens. These nocturnal turns increased in frequency as she reached the final chapters of a novel. He was ready teddy for them now.

He hoped she wasn't in the bathroom. They were the worst night visits: Vivienne clutching her gut and crying, complaining of cramps and gnawing aches. Or fixed on the mirror, eyes rolling as she tried to peer past her pupils into the recesses of her skull to locate the tumour, the clotted blood, the aneurysm. But as he left the bedroom he saw her weaving out of the lounge. She was a silhouette, made of haze. Why did she look so insubstantial in the night? She stumbled with the uncertain gait of a sleepwalker but he could see the whites of her open orbs. He tried to intercept her before she reached the



music room and failed. He trailed after her. She was at the far corner of the predatory piano, chin angled upwards as if inspecting the cornices.

Listening.

“Viv?”

His voice barely above a whisper.

“Shh,” she said. “She’s in here.”

A Mexican wave of gooseflesh along his arms.

“There’s nobody here but us.”

He moved to embrace her but she scuttled free.

“She’s in the house.” Her head ratcheted in little clicks as she strained to hear.

“She’s in trouble.”

The wind beyond the window held its breath. The room seemed unnaturally silent. No distant traffic. Spencer thought he caught something at the edge of vision: a small figure peeking out from hide-and-seek. He steeled himself, trying not to turn to verify its non-existence.

“There’s no children here,” said Spencer.

He came up alongside her. She shivered and the tiny violence of the movement caused a mustiness to shrug off her like launched spores. Blunted sweat and bed snuggles. Spencer’s nostrils flared as he savoured it. His eyes closed involuntarily.

“Outside then,” she said. “I heard her crying.”

“Let’s get you back to bed,” said Spencer.

He coaxed her back along the hallway. Her bones felt twiggy beneath his guiding hands. As he settled her between the sheets he heard something in the garden. The creak of a bough in the breeze, high pitched, keening. A distant squeal.

A call from the afterlife.

\*\*\*

The next morning the soft sibilance of the toothbrush against his molars adopted my rhythm. He didn’t realise he was doing it. As he peered into the mirror with his foamy rictus, I got my first look at him. Thin, brown hair flecked with grey sprouted from the scalp with a tendency to curl around ears and nape. Split ends hazed his hairline. He pushed a stray lock into place but it immediately reaffirmed itself as a comma at his temple. His face draped from his forehead – features dragging – although that could have

been a morning fall. And remember, I can only interpret him through his own perception; through his filters and veils. He sneered at himself, thinking he looked older than his middle forties. His pupils, once lustrous as lacquered timber, were now matt as battered bark. The gouge he once romanticised as a fencing scar, but which he actually sustained when he crashed a bicycle, now appeared to be an amoeba investigating his left eyebrow.

Vivienne slumped at the kitchen table, hoping the coffee she clung to would hot-wire her. Spencer gave her a desiccated peck on the cheek – I couldn't help noting how far from the mouth it was – and scooped up his work bag. Neither of them mentioned the previous night. He crashed out of the kitchen door, leaving via the back yard so he could farewell the dogs. Sprog the spaniel ignored him, nosing the seeded carrots in the derelict veggie patch – “No truffles in there, Sproggy” – but Bub the terrier bumped against him, attempting to jump up, forgetting about his single rear leg. Spencer scuffed Bub's head and strummed his ears.

“Hey, Bubby boy. Wotcha doing, then? Wotcha doing? Bubby wubby wubby.”  
Spencer's favourite.

As he pulled out of the driveway he snapped off the radio. It annoyed him: this morning he preferred his own meditations. As he waited at the lights his head waggled to a revenant refrain. Groove ghoul. The grumble of traffic groaned my chorus. Rush hour rhythm. The persistent honking of an angry motorist took on a carnival vibe.

I had him, I tell you. He was mine.

As he trudged up the hill towards the university blocks, wind hawed my harmonics. Across the car park he spotted his colleague, Eversley, herding his children, hoping to reach the sanctum of the crèche. Spencer hovered. Eversley's four-year-old son sprinted from car to car, obsessively booting tyres, delighting in the dull thud. His younger boy hopped in front of Eversley, begging to be carried, while his six-year-old daughter, disguised in cowl and cape, circled them on roller skates. Eversley endeavoured to reign them in, or at least keep them progressing in the desired direction. The cacophony of all four competing voices were up and down in the mix, flying or dying on the erratic wind. Eversley's face seemed pulled by hooks in various directions. His panicked pleadings pitched like a castrato. The four-year-old stopped to draw a fingertip picture in the dust of a duco. The pogoing toddler began to scream. The superhero skated towards Spencer.

“Hey, Batgirl,” shouted Eversley. “This way.”

“I'm not Batgirl. I'm BatMAN.”

She stopped and folded her arms, refusing to budge until Eversley acknowledged his gender bias. Blackmailing him into apology. Eversley aimed a sickly grimace at Spencer, the hooks about to shred his features.

Spencer smiled indulgently. A warmth infused him. He'd witnessed his workmate endure this ordeal on several previous occasions and every time he'd ached with envy.

"I hope your wife's hard at work," Eversley shouted. "I need something in my drab existence to look forward to."

"Her fingertips are blistering as we speak," Spencer assured him.

Eversley was a fan. Every time a new novel came out Spencer asked Vivienne to sign a copy for his fellow academic. She was always delighted when a man responded to her fiction. The demographic of her readership was drifting.

"So what's this one about?" asked Eversley. "The one she's concocting now?"

"Don't know. Don't pay much attention," Spencer lied. "There's a ghost in it. And lashings of sex."

"Lashings!" Eversley gave a big British farce wink. "So, a saucy spook?" He lowered his tone. "A writhing wraith?"

"A ghostly child," said Spencer.

He was ambushed by thoughts of the previous night. He struggled to recall the little he knew of Vivienne's plot. The heroine, Veronica, is a librettist, struggling to supply lyrics for Sandor's latest opera after his usual collaborator has declined, declaring that Sandor's heart was no longer in his work. Veronica has been steered into Sandor's arms via a series of mysterious incidents involving objects that move of their own accord and voices that she detects in the rustling of leaves or the rush of water past her ears in the shower. When Sandor gives her a recording of his music, she hears a child chanting in the background, despite Sandor's assertions to the contrary. Spencer's forehead creased, but his ruminations were shattered by an abrupt command from Eversley.

"Connor! Get out from under that ute!"

\*\*\*

I spent the day popping in and out of Spencer, a high-rotation hit. He was often unaware of my presence, while I manipulated him like dear old Pinocchio, pulling a string to toggle his toe or nod his nut to my spectral shimmy. At other times I cavorted, making him curse my rankling repetition. My rankling repetition. At one point, he tried to usurp

me by ramping up the volume of an aggressive sax assault on his PC. I hung back; let him think he'd won. Confident I'd finally outmanoeuvre him on the boogie battlefield.

As he left his office at the end of the day his work bag weighed him down. Was it his weariness that made it so unnaturally heavy? Or those essays he'd stuffed into it at the last minute to mark at home? He felt a pang of remorse: his best students put so much effort into their papers, which overflowed with naïve enthusiasm, depicting an ideal world of journalism that didn't exist and possibly never had. Would they become as disenchanted with the profession as he had during his years as a reporter; downtrodden by deadlines, neglected by editors, savaged by subeditors? Would they one day curse his name as they succumbed to the daily grind of pumping out column centimetres and trumpeting trivia?

A woman with a tawny fringe registered him and hoisted an arm. It took him a moment to recognise Marla in the oaky wig. She bundled up to him.

"Hey, Mr Nicholson. I know what it was. That hum you were singing." She gave a short, exasperated laugh. "That song you were... whatever. You were definitely doing it wrong."

Spencer felt aggrieved. He was thick with fatigue and his bag dragged. He wasn't in the mood for Marla's colliding words. And he felt less need to justify himself now that he was away from the appraising gazes of his dolls.

"That's okay, Marla. I'll take your word for it."

"No, no. It's right here."

She unstopped her earbuds and lifted them towards him. He tried to wave them away but she insisted and he thought he might escape sooner if he acceded. She unclipped her iPod from her waistband, sought a track with waggles and jabs of her finger, then hooked it back. She had to stand close, hips thrust towards him. Spencer felt crowded and discomposed, connected to her by the vein of wire.

Noise exploded behind his eyes, making him start and blink. He felt violated. Bass boomed in tight confederacy with a stampede of snare drum. Ack-ack guitar kicked in and a banshee shrieked about a hall of mirrors and a hunchback.

Me! Me! Me!

Fuck yeah!

Marla pulled the battering buttons free.

"Anal Probe," she cried. "Kick arse band!"

She jammed the buds back.

Fuck I was loud. I crashed around his consciousness. Rejuvenated and jaunty. This version of me. It fires; live wires.

Speed metal me. Recorded a few years ago. Anal Probe wielded the sonic scalpel. Stuck electrodes in me and galvanised every muscle. Pumped me full of steroids. Surgery sans anaesthetic, but the facelift was worth it. Hauled in a horde of new, young acolytes.

Yeah man. Long live me.

Don't fuck with the *Fairground*.

Sorry. Got the blue lingo blues, right down to my shoes. It's this version of me. Perversion of me. Makes me heady. Tops me with testosterone.

I like it.

Marla mimed an exaggerated head hammering routine. I've been inside many a head-banger. It's a bumpy ride, sloshing in cranial fluid as braincells explode all around. Knocked from nape to pate. Marla's wig jiggled and slid. In annoyance, she tore it free. Spencer was startled by the gorse of stubbly black across her crown.

He tugged the earbuds free. Tried to shake the abrasive sound out of his ears.

"Anal Probe," repeated Marla. "You were doing it wrong. Too lame."

"It's a cover," said Spencer. "The version I know is different."

"The version you know is pissy." Critics! Hate them. "This is one of the Probe's best. One of my faves." She shuffled, her vigour defusing. She reached for his collar. Spencer flinched. She picked a fibre free. "You're a furry man, Nister Micholson. You're kinda blurred. Dog hair everywhere." She cuffed her nose. "That's why I'm allergic to you."

Although no longer joined by the wire, Spencer was still uncomfortably close. He tried to peer beyond her and was dazzled by the lowering sun splintering off the panes of the Humanities block. There was a figure stalking towards them. Eaten by the glare, it appeared thin as a Roswell alien. Determination in the loping stride.

Here he comes, now now, here he comes.

Alerted by Spencer's hypnotised stare, Marla glanced back.

"Sssshit!"

"Marla!" the stick-figure yodelled.

She thrust the wig at Spencer so that he was forced to grab it. Then she was gone, sprinting around shrubs and pounding down a path towards the Science buildings. Spencer watched the unleashed energy pump through her limbs. Her speed and fluidity,

the grace with which she banked around a bush, shoulder skimming the leaves, made him think of surfers. Surfers? There was an image of a swerving board slashing through spray, with a sinuous figure flexing and genuflecting as she controlled her trajectory. Wild hair whipping her ears; curls tightened by dampness.

The stick creature produced a coloratura cry: “Marrlaaaa!” He broke into a run. As he galloped past, all loose-levered limbs, Spencer had an impression of bulbous eyes and sharp cheekbones.

Insectoid.

Marla had already been swallowed by the grey Science slabs. Spencer imagined her ducking and weaving through the labyrinths of labs and lecture theatres. The stickman ground to a halt with a defeated groan, firing glances in all directions as if wondering what to do.

His gaze stopped at Spencer.

He sauntered slowly back up the path. Spencer felt an icy spear of adrenalin. It synchronised with my own excitement: the punch-drunkenness produced by the Probe. I urged Spencer to surge forward. Show this guy he was no pussy.

Stalled Spence. His heart imitated the frantic snare attack from metal me. The stickman paused a few feet away, seizing his sides and panting.

“None of us are getting any younger.” His voice had an unexpected wheedling quality. “Summer’s coming in early. Not good for a sweater like me.” An oversized Dalai Lama tee-shirt flapped around his skinny frame. He stared directly at the wig Spencer was gingerly fiddling with. “So... what’s the story?”

“What do you mean?” An octave too high. I was impatient with Spencer. Pumped full of metal mischief, I kicked at him. Give it some grunt, cunt.

Apologies. No need for that.

“You two were looking cosy,” said the stickman.

“My student merely wanted me to listen...” Spencer baulked. “Actually, it’s none of your business.”

That’s more like it. Toughen your ‘tude, dude.

“Your student, hey?” Stickman made it sound salacious somehow. He indicated the wig. “I think I ought to take that, don’t you?”

“It belongs to my... my student. I shall return it to her in due course.”

Where’d this formal tone come from? Put some gravel in the gullet. Some death metal grrrrrowl.

“You can give it to me,” said Stickman. “I’m her boyfriend.” Spencer flicked to where Marla had last been seen, then back at Stickman. He couldn’t keep the scepticism from his face. “Okay, technically, I suppose, ‘formerly known as’.” Stickman provided air quotation marks. “For now.”

Spence tensed. He thought Stickman might try to snatch the hairpiece. Instead, the other relaxed.

“Check this out.” Stickman tugged a fistful of tee-shirt towards Spencer and poked at a stain. “Green chicken curry. I’m learning to cook. Will you tell her that? I’m changing. For her.” His face creped. His lids quivered as if unable to fully close over the watery bulbs of his eyes. “She fucking loves Thai.”

Both hovered, neither knowing what to do next. Stickman scraped at the stain on his tee-shirt and raised it to his nose. “Needs more lemon grass.” He grinned thinly, then proffered a hand. “Griff. Griff Vine.”

Spencer was surprised to find himself shaking the hand. I was ropeable.

“Marla’s tutor,” said Spencer lamely.

Griff backed off, nodding. Then spun and loped away.

Spencer fiddled with the wig. He felt uneasy displaying it in the open, as if it were lingerie. The elastic scalp of the underside seemed particularly intimate. He had a sudden realisation: the bulky jackets, the hairpieces, the shades. A disguise. To hide her from Griff.

Mata Hari Marla.

He bundled the rug into his bag.

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I capered and coughed in Spencer’s loft as he drove home. My metal mettle. The grunt of guitars made him grind gears. He found himself speeding. Furnace glare of traffic signals – danger danger. Brake lights like vampires’ eyes. He pictured Marla’s glee as she pretended to headbang. Electricity sizzling from her liquid limbs as she ran. An image of leggings burst before him like a firework. Too quick. I couldn’t grasp the spreading sparks.

At home, as he prepared dinner, the rap of the knife through a chilli pepper echoed the incessant snare of Anal Probe. The pans cymbal clashed. But as he stirred ingredients, forcing his wrist to slow, the meditative movement brought to mind the carnival churn of

my original. My measured metre. I had an identity crisis in his cranium. A Jekyll and Hyde duet.

Spencer surrendered to the alchemy of cooking. He was soothed by the way everything combined into a complex entity. He added ingredients until his nose, rather than his tongue, told him it was right. He yelled Vivienne's name up the hallway before he drained the rice. As he set the plates he imagined his wife polishing a paragraph or finessing a thought. He sat and began to eat. Vivienne shuffled in, dishevelled, clutching a notebook. Her features slack and somehow unmoored. Really, don't be fooled by this. All the angst of the wordsmith – it's mainly pantomime. Authors try to convince us that their task is traumatic, yet sentences are basic equations: noun, verb, object. Try taming words to a tune, meting them to a beat. And novelists slop around in hundreds of pages to indulge their ideas, while songwriters have a scant few verses. Scribes are drama queens. They even try to elevate their "struggle" by alluding to the likes of me, carping on about the "rhythm of language." Honestly.

Vivienne's vacant gaze settled on Spencer. Her smile pulled her features into place and anchored them. She sank into a seat opposite him.

"Have you eaten today?" he asked.

She gave fast, curt nods, like a child trying to con a parent.

I can't help noticing they haven't kissed. Lips are zippers, fastening you to your sweetheart. The Velcro of Venus. The pucker is Love's sucker.

"Eva called last night," said Spencer, returning to his seat.

"Yes. I spoke to her this morning."

Spencer felt a hangover of the resentment from the previous evening. Vivienne reached across the table to a folded newspaper. The crossword. She studied it, munching.

"I'm thinking of pulling out of the Eros Prize," she said. "Refusing the nomination. Then I could finish the book and we could go away somewhere. Just the two of us."

Their gazes locked. Spencer nodded solemnly.

"I'd love that."

But he wasn't convinced. He'd heard these plans before, near the conclusion of other novels. The holidays never eventuated. Instead, Vivienne was drawn into a whirlpool of publicity, during which she began jotting notes for her next story, terrified that ideas would dry up; that her muse would become impatient and abandon her.

As they ate they swapped idle suggestions for possible getaway destinations. Barcelona. Istanbul. Malaysia. Spencer described dawn illuminating a palm fringed



beach and I nudged forward as he pilfered from my film clip. As Vivienne finished the last morsels of stir fry she poked at the newspaper, giving an expectant grin.

“Okay,” said Spencer. “Ask me one.”

““A pair of twins, I hear, are dressed for the ballet.’ Four letters.”

She glanced over the rim of her spectacles. It made her appear coquettish.

““Tutu’,” he said. ““Pair of twins’. Two and two.”

Her short intake of breath made his heart lollop. She clawed for the pen. He circled the table and scaped a chair up close. He could feel the warmth from her shoulder. Soft, evening light filtered through the window and settled along her throat and collar bone. Vivienne agonised over an anagram, concocting nonsense syllables from the acrobatic letters, her lips pouting around the vowels. The unfamiliar vocalisations were pitched high, like caws. Spencer wondered if he should snake an arm around her. What would happen if he brushed his lips against the glimmering glow at her neck?

A memory intruded, so eager for attention that it swarmed all over me. Just last week, something had awakened Spencer and he’d seen a glow beneath his bedroom door. When he’d stepped into the hall he’d noted that most of the lights in the house were burning. He found Vivienne in the bathroom, bent towards the mirror. Her nightdress was loosened and she was kneading her left lady bump with both hands. Her expression a mask of horror.

“Lumps.” Her voice a frayed falsetto. “Full of lumps.”

Spencer gathered her in his arms, murmuring consolations. The rigidness in her back relaxed. Despite his juddering heart he was aware of her nakedness. His face simmered as he realised he was getting an extended play. A big ten inch, as Aerosmith said. He pulled his hips away from her, his bum poking out at a strange angle, as he caressed and calmed her. She became floppy in his arms. Then she gave a hoarse chuckle.

“Down, boy.”

She flapped her fingers at his ding-a-ling in a playful, chastening fashion. Spencer felt unevolved, a mass of urges. He hobbled with her back down the hall. Sprog had already commandeered her bed and Spencer had to shove the spaniel over to tuck Vivienne in. He brushed her cheek, still encumbered by the tautness between his legs.

“Naughty,” she muttered.

She eased and teased him onto the bed. She nuzzled into him, lowing sleepily. Spencer squirmed.

Spencer has seen aging rock stars on TV, courting the comeback circuit with their once fresh songs of teenage lust. He has watched them attempting suggestive dance moves, their corroded hips thwarting their pelvic thrusts, leering moues drawing in the drapes of their jowls. He felt as ridiculous now, drawn tight against Vivienne with the bedclothes between them. He had expected these unstoppable assaults to decrease with age. He thought the Colours would fade, like overwashed clothes. Instead, he'd find himself lingering outside the bathroom while Vivienne was showering, listening to the hiss of the steaming water and picturing what she was doing.

Oh, baby baby.

She overuses the soap. All those cascading suds.

Springs pinged as Bub jumped onto the bed. He lurched across the mattress on his three legs and settled against Vivienne's spine. Vivienne purred.

"Shall we get a bigger family?" she murmured, already half dreaming.

"Another pup? I don't think so. More than two dogs and you haven't got a family, you've got a pack."

She mumbled something into the pillow.

"What was that?" asked Spencer.

4' 33" settled around them and Spencer assumed she had succumbed to slumber. Then she issued an impure whisper flecked with shards of voice.

"I said, I wish I could have given you a real family."

Orchestration swelled behind Spencer's ribs. All billowing strings. He couldn't talk. He pressed against the barrier of blankets, listening as her breathing deepened. Aware of the rise and fall of her chest. Bub snorted and he felt Sprog scratching himself. The family gathered. Except for the child playing hide and seek. The seeping happiness he felt was all the more precious because he knew it would be short lived. An interlude.

Now, hunched over the crossword, Vivienne tried to snatch the pen from him and their fingers tangled. Dusk smoked up the window. Gloom drew the room tighter, cordoning them together. She leaned closer and her breath broke against his cheek. He recalled her mouthing those globular nonsense syllables and a red mirage shimmered before him. In the room but not in the room. He was bemused again. The Colours were the result of counterpoint between melody and the chafings of chick-a-boom, chick-a-boom. Rhythm plus randiness. So where was the rhythm?

Hello! Is it me you're looking for?

But Vivienne was already easing away from him. An idea for her novel had seized her and she was reaching for the notepad. Spencer tried to reclaim the pen but she shrugged him away with a grunt of irritation. She scribbled intently, her heightened state deflating.

Spencer felt stranded and somehow inarticulate. Snared in his own skin and topped full of a heat he couldn't siphon away.

Vivienne jumped up to switch on the light. The blurred lines of evening sharpened in the sallow ooze of the energy-saving bulb. The belly dancing red lingered within Spencer, ineffable as the echo following a slow-bowed cello. The holiday fantasies persisted. He saw himself and Vivienne on a shoreline in the sunset and I burst full blown into his head.

Spencer shoved his chair back. He stamped into his bedroom to retrieve his laptop and returned to set it up on the table opposite Vivienne. She glanced up from her notes, peeved. Harboursing some nebulous notion of retribution, Spencer sought me on the internet. He couldn't recall my name – huh! – and when a list of websites relating to me scrolled out, he hovered the cursor briefly over my film clip before deciding to stream sound-only.

He'd provide his own visuals.

The Wurlitzer waltz of my intro wound forth. My original incarnation, not that adolescent upstart that pumps me full of satanic scenes and amphetamines. Pictures puffed before him: amoebic impressions that he couldn't grasp. Whitewashed scenes from a colouring-in book. Then one of the transparencies suffused with wan hues. Wishy-washy; memory gruel.

Yellow and black striped leggings snatched from the arm of a chair. An alto-vibrato of panic.

"He's here!"

The bunched stripes hauled over a heel and shimmied up a shin. The calf is tacky with droplets and the material catches. It snags on the knee.

The knee. Smooth and round, flanked with tiny indentures. A mould of his cupped palm. Soft flesh folded at its underside. Not tanned, but brushed with caramel.

"Grab your fucking clothes," she cries.

He smells the hair before he sees it: a dank, bready odour. Her bedraggled curls are scalloped about ears and temples. Their spring and tension disabled by damp. Lazy locks. Wet hair has always intoxicated Spencer, speaking of the sensuousness of the beach or

the fine filigree across the forehead caused by hoochie coochie. Or the steaminess of the bathroom. Yes, he can hear a shower running somewhere. The petulant splash of an empty cubicle.

As Spencer listened to me on his computer, pawing at the past, the Colours came. A rising stain of cherry infused the sepia light of the kitchen, its advance unctuous and blobby. Animated graph. Hallucinogenic histogram. Stalagmites of strawberry, scarps of scarlet. Yeah, ahh yeah. I love this. Because I am the Colour; I am the stain. Oh, don'tcha know. And I am out of his head, in the real world. Setting the pace in space; I said, in space, I'm setting the pace. Flexing, waxing. Spreading like a sunrise. This doesn't take me by surprise. I've been experienced by synesthetes before and it's sublime. I become blossoms in the brain, or ink-in-water behind the eyes, or – best of all – I curl and skirl and breathe through the ether.

I exist. Stretching through air as I imagine you are.

Spencer rallied to retain the memory. He fought to define the woman, to fix her as she desperately dragged on the reluctant leggings, but she remained a shade. The only colours that clung to her were the ruddiness of her curls, the yellow and black bumblebee hose and the milky tea knee. He felt she was large. Amazonian.

He had no image of himself, but knew he was in a small, shabby lounge room. He had a notion of cracked corners and threadbare carpet. As he sensed, rather than saw, his body, the twinges and weariness of age evaporated. Muscles tightened. Sinews took the strain. An essence coursed through his veins, sluicing through limbs and trunk. Not blood red, as expected, but the raw green of ripening fruit. He felt fresh as a remastered recording.

"Get the fuck out." Her fiery eyes beneath ember curls. "He mustn't catch you here."

Imagine the first few bars of the *Twilight Zone* theme as we time-travel, squiggly-wiggly, back to the abandoned crossword, the smeared dinner plates and the smell of cooking staling in the air. My fade-out has streamed from the computer and – awww – I dropped and glopped from the world. Sucked back into Spencer, cramped and claustrophobic.

Sulky.

Spencer blinked at Vivienne as if surprised to see her. She was absorbed in her notes, flicking to a new page. Spencer's chest pumped out a tawdry funk tattoo – the wacka-wacka of a seventies porn flick. How long had he been holding his breath? It

burst free now in a series of shudders. He was lightheaded. Nerves frayed; live ends sparking.

He felt a schoolboy thrill, as if he'd done something forbidden and hadn't been caught.

He glanced at the aligned spice jars, the hanging pans and the racked plates and cups. Vivienne liked order in the house when she was working, especially as her writing room was covered with strewn notes, screwed up paper and gaping dictionaries. Spencer examined the hospital-white walls. The laminated cupboards were Mondrian. The dishwasher displayed the precision of its push-buttons. The neatness clashed with the messiness he had sensed in the lounge.

He punched play again.

Potency poured through me. I reigned in Spencer's brain: flooding his frontal lobes; occupying his occiput. My frequencies were rich and full. His mind remix was superior to anything he could be hearing from the tinny laptop speaker. I was in command: a maestro of memory. I flourished my baton, summoning the scene forth.

The lounge perspires the dolorous odour of ancient nicotine. Decades of smokers have tanned the wallpaper a deeper umber and upgraded the dun upholstery of the armchairs. The hues are full and earthy; oxidized. Spencer sees the woman in the leggings lead a stranger in, her arm around the newcomer's waist to steady his stumbles. She pulls the stranger close, welding them together. He's young, nudging into his twenties. His hair is matted; he bristles with stubble. His pants are paint splattered and he clutches an empty beer bottle, but he looks more than drunk. He seems fevered. He has the air of a frontiersman returned from the wilderness. Hairy and malarial. His boots crunch empty cassette cases. The woman's clothes hitch on her haunches, bunch around elbows. Traces of damp seep through.

"You caught me in the shower, lovey-dove," she says.

The stranger fumbles, trying to tousle her locks. Spencer, concealed in the shadows of the hall, burns with jealousy. He has tugged on trousers and is clutching shoes, socks and shirt. He's damp too. He and the woman had broken out of the shower when she'd heard the familiar rumble of the young man's car pulling into the driveway.

"I've missed you, lovey-dove," Rosemary tells the young man.

Rosemary.

Rosemary emerges from myth and nostalgia. No longer a sketch, she is vividly arrayed. The bumblebee leggings blaze down her thighs. She wears a blouse of splotches

that befuddles vision, blurring the lines of her upper body. She dresses to dazzle, and it often looks wrong. Inappropriate as a kazoo blowing an elegy. Spencer recalls her attending a job interview looking like an artist's palette. She's the fun at the funeral, wakey-wakey at the wake. The drying hair is working free from its damp density, giving her a hint of Gorgon. Its red lustre is reconstituting. He remembers her laugh, raucous and husky, as if constantly responding to a filthy joke. Sometimes, while searching for just the right words to express herself, her splayed fingers would bank and dive in interpretative dance. She is compact: stray hair tickles his chin when she stands too close. It's her zest, her restlessness that makes him think of her as an Amazon. She's only small in stature.

And she was always playing that song. That red song. Playing it or humming it or wailing it into a hairbrush.

Please allow me to introduce myself.

The Colours came again and I stretched and sighed and felt myself condense into carmine. I became lightly textured; puckered and blistered like old bubble-wrap. It was sensuous and lovely.

Hey, mama mama.

*Twilight Zone*; squiggle-wiggle. Back in the kitchen. The streaming stopped; the Colours collapsed. My sighing self was sucked back into Spencer's skull. Spencer surfaced into the present like a patient coming out of anaesthetic. He puzzled over the modular cupboards; the clinical walls. The dishwasher looked like sci-fi. The energy saving bulb made the room anaemic. Vivienne shot glances over the rim of her glasses. My repeated presence was unsettling her. I don't know why: she was closed to me. Her fortifications were formidable. I bounced from the bulwarks of her brain.

"Are you watching something saucy on that thing?" she asked.

Spencer uttered a dismissive laugh. Pitched too high. Her closeness and her flitting eyes both frightened and thrilled him. Wacka-wacka at his ribs.

He prodded play again.

The lounge room rushed back. There was more detail now. Scattered books and magazines, a jacket thrown across the back of a chair. The carpet had mange. He knew now it was a pokey flat in the northern suburbs of Hobart. There was a poster of JayJay on the wall. Hey Dads!

The young man studies the floor, trying to figure its function. He's unaware of skulking Spence who haunts the hall, just shy of the doorway. The young man cocks his

head up at Rosemary and his face creases into an affectionately gormless grin. What was his name again? Tommy? Tony?

Terry, I want to scream. The young man's name is Terry. I could see the older version of him in Nicole's consciousness at that very moment. I tried to inject the name into Spencer's brain. Terry. Terry. Terry.

Rosemary settles the young man in an armchair with his back to Spencer. The young man reaches for Rosemary and she sinks towards him. Spencer's mouth twists. He hates her for surrendering. He wants to get back at her.

Yes sir, yes sir, back at her. Back at her.

He steps forward, framed in the threshold.

Rosemary boggles over the young man's crown, flushed with fear. Spencer stabs an urgent finger at the coffee table, indicating that something incriminating is there, but when she looks there is nothing. He moves forward and she shakes her head, no, no. He leans in, an arm extending.

Kitchen Spencer is struck by Lounge Spence's stolid stance. There he is, racked forward. Poised; posed. Torsion in the torso. Coiled and well oiled; screws tightened, nothing rattling. Kitchen Spencer recalls a science lesson from long ago, a teacher balancing a ball bearing on a slope. The teacher spoke of potential energy, the power inherent in the object at the apex of the slide. How that energy seethed away as heat as the tiny sphere trundled. Other students suspected a con, a trick to make the equations balance and maintain the myth of energy conservation in a closed system, but Spencer could see it. As the ball bearing rolled he witnessed the energy wreathing free: a smoky electric blue. He sucked hard and inhaled it.

He knew the blue was there now, deep in the core of Lounge Spence, whose hand is almost brushing the scruffy young man's shoulder. Lounge Spence grabs a chunk of air and draws it back. Rosemary's eyes slit, uncomprehending. Spencer takes great pains to mime wedging something against an eye, closing the other. Adjusting an invisible lens with middle digit and thumb. An index finger clicks down. Say cheese!

Rosemary's brows cloud.

But I knew exactly what he was doing. The memory maestro was in control. I aimed my baton at a recollection from earlier that evening and tweaked it up, up and the scene spilled forth.

Here it is: Spencer and Rosemary are settled on the carpet, entwined, quaffing wine. The light flaring at the window suggests golden dusk. Strummy, summer sunset. Their

distended shadows are gilt edged. The wallpaper parades its tan. Spencer spouts about his studies, yammering on about a possible cadetship in Adelaide. Kitchen Spencer found it hard to recognise Lounge Spence. The youth's features are alive, a-writhe. His arms signal wildly. He raises his glass to his lips but pauses before he sips, as though studying some indistinct horizon where fog coalesces into almost discernible shapes before dissolving again. He reminds me of somebody enduring the interminable introduction of a tune because they know the good bit's coming. He sucks and sweet booze blasts across his tongue, returning him to Rosemary. Suddenly he's demonstrating what a crusading reporter he'll be. He's scribbling in an air-notebook, snapping pictures with an invisible camera and banging the story out on a quasi-keyboard. He apes determination, brooding and glowering. Rosemary pivots back, laughing. He swings his air-lens towards her. The raucous laugh convulses her as he snaps. He lays the chimera camera on the coffee table. They collapse into cuddles.

Their elongated shadow says it all: an inextricable oneness, amorphous and amorous, with an auric aura. Mass of romance. This is Love. True Love. Not house-sharing. Not sitting in the sickly light of an over-tidy kitchen locked in separate worlds. Trust me, I'm a Love Song.

I jerked the baton down, down and the scene subsided. I signalled to the encompassing memory: the scruffy young man in the armchair. He shifts to see what's troubling Rosemary. Something behind him. His movements are rusty and before he gets far she vices her palms on his head, effectively blocking his ears, and kisses him long and hard. Lounge Spence teeters back on his heels, on the point of retreat, but he's mesmerised by the way her fingertips twine tenderly into the scruff's tangles. Spencer's lips compress, splitting his face. When Rosemary pulls free and sees he is still in the room, her jaw juts in fury. Spencer flinches at the hatred she fires at him.

"Is somebody there?" asks the young man – Timmy? Toby? – struggling against Rosemary's grip.

Terry. His name is Terry. Impotence overwhelmed me. Sure, I have a slow burn capacity, worming into people's personalities, building dioramas of their past. But I have no punch, no immediate influence. I crave instantaneousness, like singer/audience call and response. I want everybody in the house to say Terry.

**TERRY!**

Lounge Spence pads down the hall towards the back door, clenching his jaw. In a blind moment, he thumps his fist into the wall.



“Who’s there?” he hears the young man slur.

Triple chorus and fade. The streaming petered. Kitchen Spencer’s breath came in a series of semi-quavers. The delicious guilt of reliving his fling while perched quietly across from Vivienne clashed with his remorse at riling Rosemary all those years ago. The arrogance of that version of him, leaping before looking. Daring to be discovered.

He peeped over the screen at Vivienne. Her face had soaked up the lardy light and the corner of her mouth twitched. Spencer knew that the repeats of me were irritating her. She looked famished and fragile. He found himself raising his hand with an invisible card pinched between thumb and forefinger. He held the air-photo so that the lustre of Rosemary’s clear, taut skin and her flashing eyes were superimposed over his wife. The snap captured during that body convulsing, lewd laugh. Vivienne yawned: her face crinkled and aged like a time lapse sequence.

Spencer lowered his arm.

Regret washed through him. The air-portrait was all Spencer had. He never did take a real photo of her.

Rosemary.

Vivienne’s voice was querulous. Mousy, with wire reinforcement. Like the tone of a shakuhachi flute.

“I’m hoping we’ve had enough of that song now.”

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Spencer left Vivienne in the kitchen and slunk along to his bedroom. He opened a lower drawer and sorted through old clothes and rattly junk. Old cufflinks, a doll’s arm, belt buckles.

“Ahhh.”

In triumph, he held aloft a ball bearing. He’d returned at recess to sneak into the science lab and snatch it from the teacher’s desk.

I’m so at home in his head now I can swing the baton with ease. I stab at the scene in the shabby lounge.

“Who’s there?” he hears the young man in the armchair slur.

“A poltergeist.” Rosemary’s voice is impish. “I’ll protect you.”

Spencer, in the hall, imagines her snuggling in. Swarming all over him. Terry’s boyish, self-indulgent chuckle.

Terry, that's right. Altogether now.

TERRY.

Spencer breaks from the back door. At the last second he grabs it to stop it slamming, enjoying the pain as his fingers jam in the jamb. Strangely, he believes he's the one being cheated on. He snarls at the shrubs and gnashes at the gnomes in the shared garden of the stalag of units.

He finds his battered Renault. When he stamps on the accelerator its antique engine gags and chokes. He slots Thelonious Monk into the tape player and ramps it up until the sound distorts. Despite the chill that's creeping in, he winds the window down, then leans across to crank down the passenger side. It's the early hours of the morning and he's blitzing the 'burbs with a bebop broadside. He's glad to be educating them, those smug sleepers in their trim, tidy bedrooms. As he drives he feels the electric blue fuming from his flesh.

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I rushed back into Spencer's head the next day as he climbed the stairs to his office. The dust-speckled windows gave the stairwell a murky, mottled atmosphere that made him feel submerged. He pictured the submarine swimmers from my film clip. They circled him as he clambered upward. The girl blurred and became Rosemary.

The first time he saw her, she was riding a surfboard on the south coast of Tasmania, red hair flaring against the mauve sea. He hadn't been in Hobart for long, moving down from Launceston for work experience as a proof-reader for the *Mercury*. Everything was an adventure. He felt the electric blue bubbling out and dyeing the water around him. When he saw Rosemary topple from the board he ducked under and watched the distant blob of her curving gracefully through the soup.

It was easy to bump into her later on the sand and engage in a conversation about surfing. Her boyfriend was playing guitar in a self-absorbed gathering near the rocks. Spencer dusted off his best jokes and invented an article he was writing about Tasmanian surf culture. He asked about the best beaches in the area and plied a phone number from her for further research. When he rang it a few days later, he suspected it would be a dummy and was delighted and slightly thrown when she answered.

In the stairwell, Spencer heard footsteps beneath him, reverbs of his own. He halted to listen. He'd been feeling uneasy since he'd left his car, throwing glances over

his shoulder. The stairwell fell silent. He peered down and thought he saw a figure duck out of sight. He had an impression of stick-like limbs and a flapping tee-shirt.

In his office, he daydreamed, tapping me on the pile of essays he should have been marking. He saw himself and Rosemary in her messy unit, enfolded on the floor in a gauzy glow. Is it the same evening as before, prior to Terry's interruption? Spencer thought it was. The level in the wine bottle is low. Her face is scrunched; she's battling tears. She tells him she wants to change courses at university. She's completed a year of marine science and her results are impressive. Her lecturers are encouraging. But she hates it. She was considering shifting her focus – perhaps atmospheric or climatology – but that would involve repeating a year.

"But you love the ocean," he says gently.

"I do. I love the magic of it. The big, unknowable power pressing around you when you're out of your depth. I don't want to learn its mechanics. That's wrong for me." She shifted uncomfortably and pulled at her wine. "Terry's not like that. He's always taking things apart to find out how they operate. You can't stop him carrying on about his favourite songs – how they're structured."

"That's what's wrong with current music," says Spencer. "Too contrived. Take this for instance." He cocks an ear to what's playing. Hi there! Rosemary has recorded a cassette of me – just me – on repeat. She has played it so many times the tape has stretched, dragging my tempo and making me woozy. It's driving Spencer crazy. "It's too calculated. You can see the clockwork. A jazz jam is different. Organic. Full of possibilities. It's like your ocean. Unknowable. Unpredictable."

Wish I had a mouth so I could yawn. All that twiddly-widdly jazz improv. Sure, a well crafted pop number has cogs, wheels and springs. They whirl and click together intricately, as Spencer inferred, like the workings that drive a clock. And the clock face presents the mystery of time. Minutes and hours that speed or crawl, the readings on the dial defying humans' attempts to divine it. "That can't be the time!" you exclaim, as you goggle at your watch.

"No way," says Rosemary. "This song's the best."

Hey sister! Go sister!

But Rosemary's expression darkens.

"Terry says I'm stupid. A spoilt bitch, he says. He says I should plough on, take advantage of what I've already achieved. Others would give their right arm for the opportunities I've had. He says I'm ungrateful, sad, lazy, crazy..."

The colours are too bright and her voice is an overloud overdub. It doesn't ring true. It's what Spencer would like to remember. I do some excavating and there's something beneath it, details that he's squashing down, hoping the subconscious will gulp them back. Terry is sympathetic, Rosemary says. He tells of trying to compose songs and how they always seem better when they are a cloudy ocean in his head, before he starts arranging his ideas. He's supportive. But he urges her to consider carefully before throwing away a year of study.

"I don't know what to do," says Rosemary.

Spencer shows her the air-application to change subjects. He fills it in with an invisible pen, blows on it to dry the signature, lays it on the coffee table and gives it an assured, peremptory pat.

Spencer broke from his daydream. His office felt stuffy. He sighed at the pile of essays and turned to his dolls. They stared back with resigned empathy. He nodded. They knew when his concentration was addled.

"Maybe a cup of coffee will put a rocket up my arse." He winced at his own expression and stood to confront them. "'Arse' is a bad word," he told them contritely.

He kissed two fingers and touched the forehead of the baby in the framed photograph.

In the refectory he clutched his coffee as if it was a lifegiving elixir. It wasn't strong enough: he'd hoped his lips would purse at every sip. I wafted through his thoughts, glancing against his past. Those few weeks he'd spent with Rosemary: was it a fortnight or longer? She was willing to risk her relationship for him. That made him special, surely? Or was it just the confusion she was enduring: her doubts about study basting in broiling hormones? He shoved his cup away from his nose and closed his eyes, trying to resurrect her smell.

The best fragrances are the ones generated within the nose. Memory aroma. Reminis-scent. The urge was to draw air deep into his flaring nostrils but Spencer knew this would dispel the smell. It's a complex concoction. There's a nutty, tannin base, like almonds soaking in tea. A sharp, dark vinegar tang, almost but not quite Balsamic. A whiff of sea salt. The ingredients were measured and blended just so, like fine cookery. Delicate, precious and elusive. Spencer inhaled lightly, trying to rouse but not rout the memory molecules playing around his nasal hairs.

He trudged back up the submarine staircase. Rosemary sliced around him, adept as a seal, having just come off her board. He ambled along the corridor and stalled. His

breathing accelerando. He'd shut his office door but now it was gaping. He half turned, cowering a little, as if expecting an assault from behind. He edged to the threshold.

A small cry escaped him. G sharp with a minor fall.

The dolls had been tampered with. Several were arranged in suggestive poses on his desk. Barbie boolooloop. One was bent over with another braced behind. Dolls had their mouths pressed to groins on his carpet. Sinful Cindy.

He launched forward, grasping the plastic and raggy bodies in tender fingers, stroking them as he eased the jutting angles of their limbs. He cooed to them as he set them back on the shelf. The beads of their eyes were troubled.

He noticed a small bare patch on his otherwise cluttered desk.

The framed photograph was missing.

A sonic squall blew me out of his head.